

THE FAR NORTH SERIES

RUNNING

A Byrd

CONTENT WARNING

Discussions of suicide, descriptions of corpses, manipulation, and abuse
Please do not continue reading if these topics are potentially triggering for
your mental health.

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Dedicated to my loving partner, J. Without your insistent support I would never have completed this in the first place.

CHAPTER ONE

"That'll be fifty cents," the child behind the booth chimes.

The customer ahead of Vic gingerly places their change in the child's hand. He turns in his mother's lap, beaming with pride, as he hands it off to her.

"Wonderful job, Paulo!" His mother praises as she puts the change away. "Have a great day, Mrs. Talbert!"

Once Mrs. Talbert moves on, the newspaper agent's face lights up as she sees Vic approaching. "Ah, good morning, Vic! Pleasure to see you up and about!"

"Morning, Mari. Morning, Paulo." Vic grabs a nearby newspaper and hands over a few silver coins. "You've been helping mama out while papa is away again?"

Paulo nods his head vigorously. "Yes, Miss Vic! I also help with the dishes and don't complain about taking a bath."

"It's true," Mari laughs. "He's been a great help around the house lately."

"Maybe I should borrow him sometime. My flat is looking rough these days."

"Working late again?"

"No, at least not for the university. Just doing some tutoring before finals."

Paulo slides off his mother's lap, clearly bored with the conversation. He runs off to the back of the booth, just within view of his mother---not wanting to lose sight of her in case she needs him.

"Ah, yea. Work about to dry up then?"

Vic shrugs. "Likely. It always does between seasons. Though..." a wry smile crosses her lips, "we're having a department meeting today about a possible internship!"

Mari claps her hands. "Wonderful! I thought you looked smart today!"

Vic takes a small step backwards and twirls, her soft brown curls bouncing as she does. "Thank you. Dad's lucky vest is getting some use again today."

Above the sounds of the morning Vic can hear the university clock begin to strike the hour. Vic stops herself instinctively and counts. One. Two. Three.

As the number of chimes approaches fives, she begins to panic. In her mind she does the math: it was six an hour ago when she left. The meeting is at nine.

The clock chimes six.

She had stopped to grab a fresh pastry from the bakery down the street from her tiny apartment. It had maybe been a little crowded, but not more than usual, surely?

Not feeling in a rush, she had decided to take the long way along the river. A bird with a peculiar call had caught her attention and she had left a few crumbs to try to entice it out.

Seven.

A brief stop to watch a fishing boat head down the river was next.

As she finished off the pastry, she wondered how many boats were out on the water that day. Lost in her own world, Vic had almost missed the sounds of the clock over the flock of geese flying overhead.

Eight.

Then she had walked to grab the paper. It took her the better part of a half hour to get to Mari's stand. She had been third in line but her watch had told her she had plenty of time to make it.

Nine.

"Shit." Vic swears as she turns to run. "Sorry, Mari!"

The university is only three blocks away, she reminds herself. Knowing the department heads involved, no one will be there until quarter after. She can make it if she runs.

As she heads past the University Station, the gates release professors and students shuffling their way onto campus. In the distance, she can just make out the sound of the whistle for the nine o'clock train. Right on schedule, unlike her.

On the next block, Vic dodges out of the way of a crowd of fine arts students excitedly chattering about their upcoming end of semester plans. As she does, she steps into a pothole in the street, sending mud splashing over her hem.

One block left, the sciences lecture hall in sight. The street is blessedly clear from students.

Against the protest of her fatiguing legs, Vic takes the large stone steps two at a time. She makes a mad dash for the heavy oak doors and sprints down the hallway.

Some lecture hall doors are beginning to close. The science professors not being known for their tolerance for tardiness.

Her heart beats hard as she sees the door to the meeting room slowly closing as well. It gives her one last push, a tunnel vision focus to make it on time.

Steps from the door, she lunges out to grab the door handle, the door itself --- anything!

The door shuts just as her fingertips make contact with the handle.

Caught off guard, she stumbles forward and narrowly avoids landing on the floor. She instead grasps the corner of a nearby display table, her hip colliding with it a second later. It makes a deafening squeak across the wood flooring.

“Alright, ok, not a great start,” she mumbles to herself, trying to smooth away a stray hair caught in her eyelashes.

Taking a deep breath, Vic squares her shoulders and tries to catch her breath. She looks down at the small watch on her wrist that tells her it’s barely ten minutes past the hour.

Shame creeps in as she gently begins to turn the handle, opening it just a crack. Through it she notices that somehow everyone else was on time. Even Professor Moreau, notorious for her twenty minute tardiness, is on time and seated comfortably. Professor Yung approaches the small lectern at the head of the room, clearing his throat as he does so.

As she scans the room she spots the only empty seat at the back of the room.

Her spot.

Her eyes land on her professor’s face. The stern face of Professor Simmons is already looking pointedly at the door, a scowl of deep grandmotherly disappointment on her face. Vic feels her cheeks burning bright pink.

Not even hearing what Professor Yung is saying, she pushes the door open enough for her to get through. All eyes are on her now. The combined judgment of the ten person room makes Vic want to melt.

“Excuse me,” she mumbles, closing the door gently. Vic quickly makes her way around the outside of the room to her seat and tries not to immediately sink into it.

Once she’s seated, all eyes return to Yung who has not stopped his presentation for her interruption. He continues droning on, now about administrative changes and university wide announcements. From the corner of her eye, she catches Professor Simmons writing something in the margins of her notebook.

‘*Where were you?*’ it reads.

Vic slumps back into her chair and that’s enough information for her professor. She shuts her eyes for a moment, sincerely wishing to open her eyes and be back in her bed. Of all the days for everyone to be on time.

“Our next presenter,” Vic forces herself to focus on the sound of Yung voice, “has had quite the journey to get here. Highly regarded and respected for his work preserving the cultures of the eastern deserts, he has now decided to tackle the challenge of surveying the frozen wastes of the Ceaseless Storm in the North.”

Vic's eyes fly open. Several of the nearby professors shift forward in their seats, pencils poised for note taking. As Vic shifts in her seat, Simmons taps the note she's left for Vic.

'We'll discuss it after.'

Vic nods her head slightly towards her professor. She knows she'll get a small telling off for being late, but it's not the worst thing that could happen. Not when there's a potential internship to get her out of here.

Yung removes the lectern he had been presenting from, clearing the floor for, "Professor Hutchens, esteemed colleagues."

A broad-shouldered, well-trained, hulk of a man takes up the space the lectern had been. Vic can just make out deep circles under his eyes. Otherwise, his tight manner conceals much about him.

"Greetings, colleagues." Professor Hutchens nods towards the senior staff, who return the greeting. "Thank you for hosting me this afternoon." His voice is deep and tight, almost bordering on irritated.

He signals to the assistant nearby to shut off the lights. A projector at the back of the room flickers to life.

"I will keep this brief, as we are all busy these days."

A slide falls into place, casting the image of a large stone slab on to the far wall. The carvings are fairly crude depictions of a fight between two groups of people, one with a crescent shape above them and the other a sun overhead. What Vic assumes are letters in an ancient language flow in vertical lines underneath the scene.

"During a brief window of unusually good weather at the edge of the Ceaseless Storm, we discovered these tablets." Another slide replaces the first, showing a group of similar looking stones laid out on the frozen ground.

"The writing is difficult to make out." Professor Moreau thinks aloud.

"Yes, apologies for that. Our window of weather did not last as long as we had expected. We were lucky to make it out with the one tablet."

"We heard your expedition ran into some mixed luck. Our condolences of course." Professor Lopez, the History professor, offers.

"No one lost their life, thankfully. Whatever rumors have made it down here, we only lost a few tents, a fair bit of supplies, and the tablets we had recently uncovered. We were only a day's hike from the local village."

Lopez strokes his greying beard and nods. "Very fortunate indeed."

"This does, however, lead me to why I'm here." As Hutchens says this, the last slide is removed and he remains lit only by the projector's light. "Once again, I'm sure the rumors have reached you all by now, but I am looking for interns to join me on a recovery mission during the autumn semester."

Vic notices several professor's assistants suddenly sit up straight. She glances at Simmons from the corner of her eye. Simmons' face gives nothing away and she does not make eye contact.

"I will accept students or assistants on recommendation only. This is not a free ride to a lifetime of fame. We will have a very short window of time before the winter storms increase."

Professor Li, the Meteorology professor --- whom Vic didn't realize had been on the other side of her, quickly asks, "If we send you with some equipment to measure...?"

Hutchens cuts the rest of the question short with a wave of his hand. "Make sure to send someone who knows how to operate it."

"Yes, yes, of course."

"Are there any assistants interested in joining me? The sooner I know – "

Vic shoots to her feet without thinking. "Yes, sir."

The room falls silent. All eyes are on her once again.

Hutchens looks stunned. The assistants of the Anthropology and Biology departments glance over at each other, trying to stifle their chuckles. Vic deflates a little with each second that passes and no one says anything. Eventually Hutchens turns to look at Professor Li.

"Just make sure to have her trained on – "

Li waves his hands desperately as Professor Simmons clears her throat from beside Vic. "That one is mine."

"Oh, excuse me, madam." Professor Hutchens bows to her.

"Appreciated, but no need. I don't consent to her going."

The Anthropology and Biology assistants turn away from her and begin to laugh in their sleeves. Vic feels her face flush as she just as abruptly sits back down.

Hutchens clears his throat. "Ah, yes, thank you. Moving on. The sooner I know who will be joining me, the better. Funding is being provided by three of the northern universities ---"

From beside her, she hears Simmons murmur to her. "I told you we'd talk about it after the meeting."

"Why wouldn't you let me go? You know I've been trying to for ages." Vic angrily whispers back at her. She puts her head in her hands, mortified that her one chance in a million may now be gone.

Through gritted teeth, Simmons curtly replies, "After."

The meeting does not go on much longer after this. There is some discussion of where the funding will be coming from and guessing at a time frame for when the expedition would ideally be underway. Some assurances get made that if the weather gets bad, the internship will be extended until conditions are safer.

Vic halfheartedly listens to this, interested if only because of the subject matter.

Eventually Hutchens holds up his hands. "Apologies, colleagues, I must ask you to forward all questions on to my assistant. He will be staying on here for a few days before joining me back in Cresida College."

"Of course, of course." Yung and his assistant rise to their feet. "Please, let us escort you to the front."

The three of them lead the way with Yung's assistant taking up the rear. One by one everyone else begins to file out. Vic remains in her seat, staring ahead at the square of light on the wall cast by the projector.

"Come along, Vic."

Broken out of her thoughts, Vic turns her attention to Simmons holding the door. Shame burns low in her chest, its embers burning in her cheeks.

As soon as the words leave her lips, Vic regrets them. "Why didn't you let me go?"

"Are we really going to do this now?" Vic doesn't respond or move. When she sees that Vic won't give in easily, Simmons sighs and closes the door. "Seems we are then."

She crosses back to the center of room, filling the space Hutchens had left. "I didn't let you join them because we aren't needed for this kind of trip."

"Neither is the meteorology department, yet Professor Li's assistant gets to go!"

"There's more need for their research up there than..." Simmons cuts herself short and shakes her head, stray strands of gray hair falling loose from her bun. "No, there's no sense beating around the bush. Vic, I didn't let you go because your work hasn't been up to the task."

Vic stares at Simmons, not quite comprehending what she just said. The heat in her cheeks dissipates for a moment as she tries to figure out where things fell apart. "I don't understand. I thought everything was fine."

Simmons sighs. "Two months ago I asked you to catalog the Early Rebault Dynasty maps, for example. It's still not done. I'm also still waiting for your department report for the last two semesters, which you know the university expects a month after the end of term."

"I've been busy with reading and grading the term papers from the joint lecture! Plus handling your office hours. Not to mention..."

"Vic!" Simmons interrupts. "You've been working with me for five years now, these duties are the minimum and have been since day one."

Feeling the color rising in her cheeks again, Vic gets to her feet to defend herself. "You can't look at this semester in a vacuum then! It's just been one semester out of five years worth!"

Simmons purses her lips. "It's been like this for over a year now, Vic."

Vic has no ready-made excuse. Nothing different has happened this year compared to the one before. Or the one before that.

"It's just always the same!" She blurts, pacing towards the door. "I've been here for five years and it's always the same! This is the one thing I've wanted since then. Here's my chance and you ruin it for me!"

Vic stops abruptly, turns, and paces back to fetch her bag from the chair she left it on. Still standing in the light of the projector, hands clasped together in front of her, Simmons watches Vic with a look of disappointment across her face.

"I took a chance on you, Victoria Halloway. When you first arrived here everyone said I'd be insane to take you on. No formal education, no work history. You told me then that you would work hard."

"And I have!"

"Yes." Simmons replies curtly. "You have. I told you then that our department does not go on these trips, usually. I also said then that your ability to be considered would depend on your continued work ethic. I'm telling you now that over the past year, it hasn't been enough."

Vic looks down at Simmons' feet, the shame in her cheeks glowing brightly. Simmons continues, "If you want to achieve your dream, you have to put in the work. I thought that, after all this time, you would understand that. I wanted to prepare you - educate you - enough to be able to leave here and have the skills to go to any university you chose to work for. Now, I'm considering if this is the best path for you."

"How do you mean?" Vic timidly looks up at Simmons' face.

"If this work has become so routine for you that you forget to do it, I suggest you begin seeking employment elsewhere. Otherwise, I think it would be wise for you to learn how to spot opportunities to be more involved."

With nothing left to say, Simmons leaves the room.

Down the hall, Vic can hear some of the lecture hall doors opening now and again as students leave their exams. She stands there in the dark room for a moment longer, letting the lingering embers in her heart grow dim. Eventually she wills herself into movement and begins a somber walk towards Simmons' office.

As soon as she enters, Simmons shakes her head.

"You're dismissed for the day, Vic."

Caught by surprise, Vic stands uselessly in the doorway. "I could organize those maps," she attempts to offer.

Simmons once again fixes her with a disappointed look. "No, I'll handle them myself. I want you to take the rest of the day to clear your head."

"Are you...firing me?"

"No." Simmons gets to her feet and crosses to the doorway, gingerly placing a hand on Vic's shoulder. "That's up to you to decide. If this work is truly so tedious for you, I think you should take the day to explore other options."

"I'm sorry, I really will work hard. I can't afford to not have this job."

"That's why I'm not firing you, Vic. I'm giving you time. Take it and use it. If I don't see you here in the morning tomorrow, I'll assume our working relationship is over."

"Yes, Professor Simmons."

Simmons smiles at Vic as she pats her arm. "Go on, I'll be here."

Vic shuffles back out the door and down the hallway.

Not realizing when she got there, Vic finds herself wandering down to her favorite café by the river.

It was easy to miss. A narrow shop, tucked between two used book dealers. The only giveaway of it being there was a newly refinished wood sign with the name *Orlando's* across it in gold, hanging just above the doorway.

A small bell chimes as she enters. From the back she hears, "Be with you in a minute!"

At the far end is a raw edge cherry wraparound counter, empty of patrons except for a weary looking professor at the bend. Vic grabs a seat near the kitchen door. She lets herself sink into the plush high backed bar stool.

A few minutes go by before the shop owner himself appears. "Sorry, just got off the phone - " Orlando's face breaks into a grin as he sees her. "Vic! Where have you been?"

Vic laughs nervously and blushes. "Orlando, it's good to see you too. I've been busy, mostly with tutoring after work."

"How come you don't bring them around here anymore?"

"They just aren't willing to come this far." She shrugs. "I don't think I've left the university square much all year."

Orlando shakes his head and rolls his eyes. "A few more blocks and they'd be in the prettiest part of this town."

"Blame it on the commuter train, I guess. They come in for the day, are exhausted by the end of classes, and just don't want to leave the square."

"Ah, I suppose you're right. Well, what brings you in today?"

"Simmons gave me the rest of the day to think over things." Vic sighs and looks down at the counter. She lets her fingers glide across the bar top until they reach a particularly sticky spot.

"That's generous of her. Think over what though?"

"How every day is the same as before. I wake, get ready, arrive to work, grade papers and exams, tutor students through the day, then go home and sleep. Yet I never get one step closer to leaving."

"Sounds like you need a holiday. Besides," Orlando blushes, the pink creeping through his copper beard, "I don't know why you have to leave. We've really missed you here, Vic."

Vic blushes in spite of herself as she worries at the sticky bar surface. "I just need a change of scenery."

"Or maybe a new job?" Orlando offers, his voice betraying his hopefulness by cracking.

"Professor Simmons suggested I consider it as an option." Vic finally raises her gaze to meet his. "Is that an offer?"

He blushes again, this time breaking their eye contact to wipe down the spot on the counter she had been worrying. "If you need work, it'd be nice to have the hands

around the café. Couldn't pay you what you're used to from the uni, but it'd be different."

Before Vic can respond, a telephone in the back begins to ring. "Ah, that'll be the coffee supplier. I'll be right back." Orlando abandons the dirty rag on the counter and rushes to the back.

After a moment, she realizes how warm she's gotten and begins to roll up her sleeves. The walk over had been helpful to clear her head, but ultimately the heat of the late summer day had forced her to duck out of the sun.

Taking her bag from off her shoulders, she remembers the paper she had grabbed that morning. Pulling it out, Vic lays it across the counter top. She flicks through the pages --- scanning each quickly --- until she comes upon the open positions page.

Turning the paper inside out, Vic pulls a silver fountain pen out of the breast pocket of her vest. Her eyes begin to hungrily search through listing after listing.

There is a whole section dedicated to wealthy families seeking governesses, though the idea of being around small children had never much appealed to Vic. She could struggle by as just a tutor, but budgeting to make ends meet between semesters would always be in flux. In frustration, she begins to fiddle with a stray curl that dances at the edge of her vision.

Turning over to page two, general day labor requests begin. A call for gardeners at the Manchester House, which is somewhat surprising to see. The museum is looking for a new head groundskeeper. Vic rules them out almost immediately, reminding herself she isn't that desperate yet.

She flips to page three: accountants and office assistants. Finally, the other option open to her. She stops fidgeting with her curl and begins a more thorough search.

'Jay, Sons, & Hartford Law is seeking a knowledgeable legal assistant for upcoming season. Considering recent graduates.'

'Westford Books has an opening available for a seasoned bookkeeper. Must be comfortable with foreign currencies and tax laws. Please supply letters of recommendation upon application submission.'

Each one she reads seems further and further out of her area of expertise. Besides, with only one potential recommendation, she's unsure if even that would be enough. Had it been this difficult when she applied for the university job?

She puts the paper and pen down and gazes up at the ceiling. Five years had disappeared so quickly. In so many ways it still feels like she just arrived in town; there are so many places she hasn't ever bothered to explore. Trying to not reflect on things left undone, she looks back down at the paper.

As she goes to pick up her pen, she spots an ad that sparks her curiosity. '*Exciting Opportunity for Hungry Adventurer!*' Already a sharp contrast to all the others before it.

'Exciting Opportunity for Hungry Adventurer!'

The Private Collection of Mr. Robert Brice seeks a cataloging assistant. Knowledge of the Northern Territory is useful. Travel required, some destinations exotic, must be comfortable with chaos. Please call the Brice residency for more information. 1523 Oak St.'

Even though it's plain as day on the paper, Vic reads it again in disbelief. There it is --- in black and white, as if tailor made to her, the perfect opportunity to get North. She flicks off the cap of her pen and circles the ad, taking care to underline the address provided.

She glances down at her watch and notices that it's already nearly noon. If she calls now, she reasons, she's likely to catch them before the lunch hour and set something up for the afternoon. Excitement warms her heart, bolstering her spirits once again.

Thankfully she hears Orlando hang up the phone. She looks up at him as he returns and plainly asks, "Would you mind if I used your telephone?"

Taken aback, he strokes his beard and laughs nervously. "Of course. Everything alright?"

Grabbing the paper, Vic slips around the end of the bar and heads into the back room. "Just trying to not talk myself out of something."

"The operator will tell you the charge to connect. Try not to take too long, I'm racking them up as it is!"

She nods back at him and picks up the receiver. Orlando closes the door behind her, closing her into the narrow kitchen. She shakes the paper out and marks the address with her finger as the operator answers.

"Westford Central, where may I direct your call?"

"1523 Oak St, please."

"The Brice residency. The price to connect is a silver a minute, will you accept the charge?"

"Yes, thank you."

The line clicks over and a delicate ringing echoes in the receiver. When no one immediately answers, she wonders to herself if maybe they're already out to lunch. After the seventh ring, she resolves to hang on for just one more, beginning to feel like a bother.

Suddenly, the phone clicks. "Hello, Brice residence," says a cheerful female voice on the other end. "Mister Brice is currently away. My name is Emily and I'm happy to relay any messages to him."

"Ah, yes, hello." Vic involuntarily utters. "I was calling about the ad in the paper for the position of a cataloging assistant."

"I'm sorry, what ad?"

"The um," Vic stammers nervously, afraid maybe she's called the wrong place. "The ad in the *Times*. It listed this address as the one to call for more information."

Faintly, Vic can hear Emily mutter to herself. "The ad in the *Times*? The ad in the *Times*. The ad in the --- oh! Yes! Wonderful! Are you available to meet this evening?"

Surprised, Vic feels the glow of excitement roar within her chest. "Yes. What time?"

"Ah, let's make it dinner time. 6 o'clock. Robert will be there, of course." Vic can hear Emily rustle with something on the other end, "I'm sorry, would you repeat your name again, please?"

"Oh, so sorry. It's Victoria Holloway."

"Perfect, yes." There is a brief moment of silence on the line before Emily continues, "We'll see you for dinner then, Ms. Holloway."

"T-thank you, Emily."

"Have a wonderful afternoon!" Emily hangs up and the line goes quiet.

Vic returns the receiver to the cradle and leans back against the counter behind her. She takes a quick glance at her watch again --- six hours until the meeting. In her head she starts doing the math to make sure she has time to get home, freshen up, and head out.

Realizing she'd need to leave now to make any of it work, she makes her way back out to the front of the bar. From the wallet in her pocket, she takes out a ten silver piece and leaves it on the bar for Orlando.

He glances down at it. "This is too much!"

Vic turns around to face him, hand on the doorknob and a smile spreading across her face. "Keep it! Wish me luck, think I found a new job."

She waves to him before walking out into the afternoon sun. Orlando laughs and shakes his head after her, depositing the change into the register.

CHAPTER TWO

Emily bustles about in the kitchen, blue apron covered in flour, wavy hair plaited in a crown around her head. She hums to herself as she cleans up the kitchen from her chaos. Just as she turns to check the time, a sweet canary cuckoo clock announces the five o'clock hour.

"Perfect!" She exclaims cheerily, wiping her hands on her apron, squishing what feels like paper in one of her pockets. Pulling it out, recognition dawns on her face and she marches out of the kitchen towards the staircase at the front of the house.

She quickly ascends to the third floor and continues down a short landing, stopping at a door on the left. She knocks and waits to be beckoned in.

"Come in." Says a male voice from within.

The room is lit by electric lamplight, the heavy burgundy damask curtains blocking out the early evening light filtering in from the large windows. In the center of the room sits a heavy walnut desk with piles of paper neatly stacked atop it. Bookshelves frame the doorway and continue along the wall while a fireplace consumes much of the opposite wall.

Sitting behind the desk is a pensive looking man, absentmindedly rubbing the short black hair of his beard. He looks up at her and smiles, "Ah, Emily. How's dinner coming along?"

"Hi ho, Robert," Emily giggles. "Dinner is in the oven now, but I forgot to tell you something."

"Oh?"

"Someone called about the ad in the paper!"

Robert creases his brow for a moment, confused. "What ad in the paper?"

Emily laughs and pulls out a copy of the paper from a pile of them on Robert's desk. She begins thumbing through the pages as she explains, "I'd forgotten about it too. We took it out so long ago."

Robert takes the paper from Emily and reads the ad she points to. He lightly chuckles to himself and drops the paper to the desk. "Hard to believe anyone responded to that."

Emily returns to the other side of the desk and sinks into one of the chairs opposite him. "It took me a moment to remember when she called, but we did take that ad out nearly five years ago."

"Truly?"

"It's true. I looked back at the ledger and we've paid the paper to renew it every year."

"Didn't you think to ask me about it?" Robert teases lightly.

"After year two, you just said to keep it open!"

"I believe you, that sounds like me." Robert concedes easily, holding his hands up in surrender. "Well, I don't really have the work that I once did. It seems a waste to have this person come all this way."

Emily glances over at the clock on the wall. "We can't cancel now, she's probably already left to get here."

"She?"

"Oh, yes, her name is Victoria Holloway. I ---" Emily hesitates for a second and flushes again. "I never found out what her work experience was."

"It's alright, Em, it's alright. Since she's likely already on her way, we'll keep the appointment."

Emily claps her hands together in delight. "Wonderful!"

"Anything else?"

The smile fades from Emily's face for a moment and she sighs. "Yes, now that you mention it."

"What's going on?" Robert frowns in concern as he watches her attentively.

"This is difficult to admit," Emily sighs. "I've been having some difficulty with lifting things. Johann is only around so much to help, as much as he'd like to be here every day."

"Have you been to see Doc Tobey lately?"

She shakes her head and looks over at the fireplace. "I haven't been able to get the time away."

"Emily," Robert says sternly, "I will always give you time to go take care of yourself."

"I know, but you and Johann have been away a lot. It's been difficult to get away with the amount of things going on in the house. Doubly so with the extra duty of needing to coordinate deliveries and shipments."

"You're right, it's too much for just you." Robert leans back and rubs at his beard again, "I will keep that in mind this evening, how's that?"

Emily nods at him and slowly gets up from her seat. "Thank you, Robert."

"Promise me you'll schedule a visit with Doc Tobey soon?"

"I promise," she agrees, smiling and slinking out of the door.

Vic tugs at her wrinkled vest, attempting to smooth out one last stubborn crease in the hem as she walks. Though she had searched through her whole wardrobe for something more professional, in the end her outfit for the meeting that morning was the nicest outfit she had.

Even her hair had fought attempts to be tamed as she tried to force it into a bun. She had tried in vain to contain it with pins, but her curls simply refused to behave and insisted on falling into her vision as she walks.

She stops before the large iron gate and brick garden walls of 1523 Oak St. Taking a deep breath, she releases her grip on the errant vest hem, and pushes on the gate door. It swings open with minimal effort, almost eager to let her into the house.

She briskly walks down the cobblestone path to the porch. Weeds from the overgrown garden tickle the dirt on her hem. Though she had taken pains to remove as much as possible before her walk, some had inevitably gathered as she took a shortcut through the park.

Her anxious energy threatens to turn uncontrollable as she gazes at the imposing and heavy looking front door. She takes a deep breath, trying to calm herself, and delicately knocks on the door.

Within seconds, Emily emerges from a room off to the right, an embroidery hoop in her hands. Upon seeing Vic through the clear glass door panels, she drops the work off on a nearby credenza and seems to almost skip to open the door.

"You must be Miss Victoria Holloway!" Emily greets her with glee, opening the door wide.

Vic stands nervously before Emily, her nose turning pink as the other woman looks her over. Chestnut curls frame Vic's face as her unruly bun slowly slips the small hairpins holding it together. With a gentle smile, Emily ushers her in.

"It's wonderful to see you. Would you like a moment to freshen up?" Emily asks as she closes the door.

Vic nods her head and as she does so her bun finally breaks free. "Please."

"Of course," Emily giggles and shows Vic to a small water closet next to the main stairwell. "Let me help you."

Emily takes the remaining pins in Vic's hair out and begins to resection her hair, leaving a few small curls to frame her face. Now and again Vic winces, not used to having others touching her hair. It only takes her a minute to gather Vic's hair on top of her head and recoil her bun, securing it tightly with a spare hair cage laying nearby.

She smiles at Vic in the mirror as she admires her handiwork. "There, much better."

Vic takes a look at the result and is amazed at how tamed her hair is. "It's never been so neat before. Thank you."

Emily gently takes Vic's elbow and begins to lead her back out towards the parlor to the left of the entryway.

The two women enter the homely decorated room full of mismatched furniture. A hulk of a man sits in a chair that almost seems comically small in comparison. He looks up from his reading, his broad open face breaking into a warm smile upon their arrival.

"Hello, love," he greets Emily, putting his book down. "Is this our guest?"

"This is Victoria Holloway. Victoria, this is my husband Johann."

Johann reaches a hand towards Vic. "Great to meet you, Victoria."

She gingerly takes Johann's hand. "Please, call me Vic."

"Vic then." Johann grips her hand a bit too tightly as they bow their heads towards one another.

"Robert should be down any moment. He sometimes gets caught in work," Emily explains from the dining room.

"We were wrapping the accounts when he sent me down. Just double checking that all the expenses are necessary, love." Emily flushes as Johann winks to her.

Though nervous, Vic watches the two of them with a slight smile on her face. Johann leads the way into the dining room and pulls a chair out for her at one end of the table. The chair is plush and well upholstered in rich green velvet, unlike the others which all appear to be from different dining sets themselves.

It isn't an overly grand table --- a simple oak table with a thin gold inlay running along the edge. Above hangs a modest, though impressive, electric chandelier that holds her attention for a second.

"This is quite the eccentric collection of furnishings."

Johann settles into an intricately carved chair next to her. "Odds and ends of sets we've picked up over the years."

"Is Robert an antique furniture dealer then?"

"Among other things. You're not familiar with the antiques world I take it?"

Vic feels a flicker of embarrassment. She hadn't thought to do any research before coming to dinner. "I can't say that I am."

"That's alright," Johann reassures. "We exclusively focus on cultural preservation, art, and books."

From a door on her right, Emily emerges with a basket of bread slices and jar of orange compote.

"Main course will be done in a few more minutes." She explains as she sets things down. "Would you care for any wine, Vic?"

Vic shakes her head at Emily as the other woman moves back to the kitchen. "No, thank you."

The sound of heavy footsteps approaching prompts Vic to turn towards the noise. Robert lifts his gaze from the floor and catches her hazel eyes staring at him in surprise.

His foot lands more harshly than he intends as he comes to an abrupt halt.

For a moment, any color in his face drains away as his mind flashes images of ghosts before him. The way small curls frame the sides of her jaw, her curious and unguarded expression --- it takes all his willpower to return to the present moment. He looks away, clears his throat, and continues on his downcast march towards the chair opposite her.

Vic tries not to stare as he settles in. A flush burns through her cheeks as she takes in his soft, almost boyish, features. She can feel the tip of her nose turning pink as he runs a hand through his lustrous black hair.

Emily shares a brief knowing look with Johann before heading back into the kitchen. He clears his throat to grab Vic's attention. "Vic, this is Robert. Robert, this is Victoria Holloway."

"Pleasure, Miss Vic." His voice floats over her like the tide, quelling the heat in her chest.

She takes a deep breath and bows her head towards him. "Glad to meet you, sir."

There is a brief moment of silence in the room before both Johann and Robert begin to laugh despite themselves. Vic looks between them, alarmed, as Emily once again returns from the kitchen bearing a hot casserole. The two men try to contain themselves as Emily works, shaking her head at them the whole time.

“Are you already teasing our guest?” She playfully nags them, setting her pot holders off on a small service table behind her.

“Oh, Em, you would’ve laughed too!” Johann says between small chuckles.

Robert regains his composure first. “Forgive us, Vic. It’s just been so long since anyone has been so formal in this house. Please, feel free to refer to us by name.”

Johann continues to chuckle to himself for a moment afterwards, clearly deeply amused at the situation. As she serves him a piece of the casserole, Emily playfully shakes her head at him, kissing the top of his head lightly before moving on to serve Vic. He eventually reels his laughter back in and smiles warmly over to Vic.

“So sorry. He’s right, it’s been forever since someone was so formal with Robert. Nowadays only people who have some kind of problem call him that.” A large smile spreads across his open face. “We’re a very informal and small group, there are very few secrets between us.”

Robert clears his throat, claiming Vic’s attention. He picks up his goblet of wine and takes a sip. For the first time, she notices that he is the only one missing a place setting.

“He’s right. Very few secrets between us three, though we’ve had the benefit of years together. It’s important for us to be able to trust each other.”

Emily settles into her seat on the other side of Vic. “Don’t worry,” she lightly touches Vic’s arm, “we understand it’s a lot to ask someone new to just open up. I hope you’ll come to trust us over time.”

“Yes,” Robert continues. “Though I suppose we ought to get down to the interview portion of this fine meal.”

Vic takes a sip of water and contemplates taking a bite before thinking better of speaking with her mouth full. “What would you like to know?”

“Let’s start at the obvious place. What about this ad convinced you to reach out?”

Vic draws herself up and clears her throat. “To be honest, Robert, I want to travel North.”

The air seems to go out of the room as soon as she says this. Emily and Johann share another look, this time of concern. They look at Robert for some sort of indication of how he feels about this information.

Robert looks Vic over, scrutinizing her for anything out of place, but he holds any other indication of his mood to himself. "Why the North?"

She hesitates for a moment, absentmindedly feeling around the edges of an oval locket buried under her shirt. "I heard about the ruins discovery and I wanted to see it for myself."

"Where did you hear about that from?"

"I...worked for the university. It's all everyone has been talking about."

"Worked? Past tense?"

Vic crosses her legs, suddenly feeling the need to guard herself. "Yes. I, uh, left this afternoon."

"You're available immediately, wonderful. Any recommendations?" A small smile spreads across Robert's lips, Vic gently bites down on her own.

"Yes, I'm sure Professor Simmons would be happy to -"

Robert waves a hand and cuts her off. "No need. If I want to pursue it later, I will. At least things seem to have come to a mutual resolution."

"Yes."

"Which department did you say again?"

"I didn't," Vic sighs. "Cartography."

Robert chuckles in surprise. "I didn't know they still had their own department! Any interesting discoveries to share?"

"We don't do much in the way of research these days. We are strictly a teaching and archival department for the university now."

"Such is the way. Though you have archiving skills, which will be handy here. I take it that they didn't want to include a cartographer on their mission?"

Vic's cheeks flush pink, wondering how he could have guessed. "We weren't needed and I was not permitted."

Vic looks down at the untouched casserole on her plate. Robert watches her for a moment, amused with the way her face betrays her as it softens from frustration to acceptance.

"Well, we may not be headed North for quite awhile. I'm afraid to say that while most of my personal collection is from there, I rarely travel there these days. What I need is someone to help in verifying, cataloging, and eventually selling some stray pieces I've gathered over the years."

Mid-bite Emily lights up and hurriedly chews in order to add. "Yes, yes! To be honest, I also need some help around the house with things. You're not opposed to doing housework, are you?"

With the attention back on her, Vic shakes her mind free of her sulking to respond. "I'm not against it, no."

"Wonderful!" Emily beams and motions for Vic to help herself to her food.

"I've been helping Robert with the cataloging," Johann chimes in. "I'll show you where we're at with that."

Robert nods his head in agreement, "You'll also be accompanying Johann to auctions. We do some travel, which you'll be permitted to accompany us on if you get a good sense of the current collection."

Vic raises her eyes to meet Robert's deep brown ones. "Does this mean...?"

"If you still want the position, it's yours." Robert smiles.

"Yes!" Vic exclaims, sitting forward in her seat. "Yes, thank you."

"Glad to have you with us then," he says softly. "The wages won't be what you're used to at the university, I'm sure. Though, we do have a spare room if you're in need of accommodations due to the hardship."

"I wouldn't take up too much space, I don't have much."

"There's plenty of room. We'll keep the furnishings for you, but you're free to decorate as you like."

Emily interjects, once again motioning for Vic to eat some food. "I also sew for the household, I'd be happy to repair anything for you. Or we can talk about tailoring an existing wardrobe."

Robert stands and grabs his glass off the table. "We'll discuss it more tomorrow. Come sometime in the early evening and we'll be ready for you. Until then, friends," he bows to everyone slightly, "it has been a wonderful evening. Enjoy the rest of your delicious meal, I have some business to wrap up."

He marches back out of the room, only stopping at the parlor doorway to turn around and peer back at the table. Now happily eating Emily's casserole, he watches Vic relax around his two closest friends. He leans into the door frame and smiles to himself, caught in the peace that laps at his heart.

Taking a sip from his glass, Robert comes back to the present moment and the work ahead of him. Pushing himself away from the door, he turns and heads up the main staircase to the second floor. Once on the landing, he opens up a room to his left and begins the process of sweeping out the cobwebs.

CHAPTER THREE

The excitement from the evening before makes sleep elusive. Daydreams of her negotiating and traveling to far off places fill her mind, eventually lulling Vic into a short sleep broken by the first train of the day whistling through town.

Even though she purposefully tries to waste her time in the morning, Vic still finds that she has packed all her things well before noon.

By the time she hears the university bell chime four, Vic can hardly wait any longer and she begins her journey to the house.

She finds her way to Robert's without any issue despite being burdened with heavy bags. Though it all fits within a small trunk and large carpet bag, both burst with things she'd collected over the years. For the first time, the realization of how rooted she had become to Westford dawns on her.

When she arrives, Vic spots Emily and Johann out in the garden, engrossed in clipping back weeds and overgrowth. For a moment she watches as they play with the dandelions, tickling one another like children with their soft yellow blossoms.

The sound of her trunk on the cobblestone walkway breaks up their laughter. Johann kisses his wife's cheek and comes over to open the gate for Vic.

"Vic!" Emily exclaims in surprise. "You're earlier than expected."

Vic laughs as Johann easily picks up her trunk with one hand, the other holding open the gate. "I couldn't wait any longer. Robert never did give an exact time."

"You're right. Johann will put your things up in your room. Make yourself comfortable, I'll go see if Robert is awake."

"He's not awake at this hour?"

"Ah," Emily hesitates a moment before continuing. "Robert is just that way. He may very well be awake, but he tends to keep to his quarters on the top floor."

"I hadn't realized he was so reclusive."

Emily laughs as she stands. "He's reclusive while Johann and I are always caught in our own world."

"Better than being in an unhappy marriage."

"Too true." She walks over to the front door before turning to say, "Welcome home, Vic. I truly hope you'll be happy here."

Vic smiles after Emily and watches her retreat into the house before following. Not sure where to head, she stands in the entryway and gazes up the long staircase heading upwards.

Last night she didn't get a chance to truly appreciate the intricate snaking ivy detailing carved into the banister. Likewise, as she turns her attention to the doorways to her left and right, she notices the stained-glass archway depicting yellow and amber phoenixes among a field of white lilies.

"Give it another few hours," Johann says as he makes his way down the stairs, passing Emily as she heads up. "The room lights up like it's on fire."

"Sounds beautiful." Vic tries to imagine the white hallway walls ablaze with light.

"In the morning, the one around the sewing room casts this soft glow of a fire going out." Robert joins in as he follows Johann down the stairs. "Welcome, Vic, glad to see you've returned for another day. Shall we start the tour?"

Vic smiles and nods as Robert approaches her. He seems more confident today, his motions more fluid rather than the near militaristic display from the night before. They move just to the left of the staircase into a narrow hallway.

Robert leads her down a short hallway and stops outside another archway leading to the kitchen. "Last night you saw the lounge and dining room. This leads into the kitchen. Feel free to make yourself whatever you'd like during the day, though Emily usually makes some sort of meal in the evening."

He gestures for Vic to lead them back down the hall to the front. As they stop at the main entryway again, Robert points over to the room on his right before heading upstairs. "That's Emily's sewing room. A sacred zone. Don't worry, before long she'll have you in there full of pins and half finished pants."

She smiles to herself as Robert leads them upstairs. When they reach the landing on the second floor, Vic catches sight of an open door just to her left. Inside a modest room at the back of the house is and engrossed Emily, delicately folding and stacking a few crisp white bed sheets and spare linens on top of a bed.

Robert clears his throat as he goes up to her and Emily starts in surprise.

"Robert!" she scolds as she shakes the towel in her hands at him.

"Sorry, Em," he laughs. "It was too perfect."

She rolls her eyes at him, smiling, and notices Vic waiting in the doorway. "Come on in, this is your room after all."

Vic steps into the room proper and immediately notices the large window overlooking the alleyway. The neighbors have let ivy and other shade loving plants

eat up whatever space they want. Some have even gone so far as to train the ivy for their own privacy purposes, blocking off balconies from view.

The effect is magical, as if she's stepped into her own secret garden.

A set of lush green velvet curtains hang across the window, held back by golden rope ties. The bed is laid with a plain set of sheets covered by a thick green down comforter. Near the doorway stands a tall dresser with a mirror topping it, reflecting back Robert's beaming face as he watches Vic take in the room.

"You also have a small washroom," Emily adds, opening a door adjacent to the bed. "Just a water closet and bathtub."

Vic peers into the room briefly, noting that it is a fairly small and cramped space. "I've always had to share one, this is incredible."

Robert stands a little taller with pride as he steps back out into the hall. "Let's keep moving. Emily seems to have some other surprises planned, so let's not ruin that for her."

Vic shyly glances over at Emily, who in turn shares a look of playful irritation with her. "Yes, best let Robert show off his eclectic taste. It's been so long."

Robert laughs and heads on down the hallway, leaving Vic to catch up. Vic gently grabs Emily's hand, gives it a soft friendly squeeze, and heads out of the room. Emily smiles as she leaves, returning to the work of laying out clothes and arranging the room neatly.

As Vic turns down the remainder of the short hallway, Robert gestures towards the other half of the landing. "Emily and Johann live just across the landing from you. If you need anything from either of them, chances are they're in there or the sewing room."

Vic nods and follows Robert into the next room. It's a long and narrow room that takes up the majority of the front of the house. Early evening light fills the room and highlights the growing dust on every available surface.

A long simple wooden table sits in the center of the room, littered with papers. The bookshelves are nearly empty as every book is either stacked on the table or against the walls in piles. Most of the collection appears to be books, though Vic does notice some strange stone tablets, canvases of various sizes, and pieces of pottery mixed in.

"Some are replicas," Robert admits. "Though some are genuine. You'll learn the difference soon enough if you read any of these books."

She traces her fingers over the spines of a stack near her. "What sort of topics do they cover?"

He crosses over to the long table and leans against it. "Most things. Language, art, archaeology, history; those make up the majority of the collection."

"Do all of these need to be organized?"

Robert laughs a little and heads back towards the door. "We'll talk about it later with Johann. Some are things I've been perpetually trying to sell."

Vic sighs and allows herself to be escorted out of the room and towards a staircase at the end of the hallway.

"My quarters are upstairs. Typically you can find me in my study, I wouldn't bother looking elsewhere."

"Are you that busy?"

"It isn't just that I'm busy. Em will tell you that I'm really just brooding."

Vic laughs at this though Robert does not. "You're serious?"

He gives her a wry smile before opening a door to the left of the landing. "You'll find out soon enough. I tend to work late into the morning, I apologize in advance if any shuffling startles you."

Vic begins to ask him if he ever sleeps, but as she steps into his study she is immediately taken over by curiosity. This room is by far the most eclectic of the house; scrolls, ghastly paintings, and odd trinkets seem to take up much of the room. The heavy curtains are closed, the only light being cast from a lamp sitting in the far corner.

"Don't worry about the things up here, they're not a part of the rest of the collection." Robert sinks into his chair, gesturing to an empty one across from him.

She takes the seat offered, turning slightly in her seat to stare at a painting behind her. "Where did you find these?"

"Do you know anything about them?"

"I'm not sure..." Vic lets herself trail off as she gets up and wanders closer to the image. She pulls it free from behind some other canvases, propping it up against the bookshelves that frame the doorway.

It depicts a pale face contorted back into a terrifying grin, as if the creature's mouth is too big for its face. Two rows of sharp teeth fill its mouth, dark streaks giving them the appearance of having recently eaten something bloody. The features on the rest of the face seem to be contorted into pain or anger, Vic can't really tell.

"Aren't these the creatures the native tribes in the North call the vampyr?" She asks, voice barely above a whisper.

Robert smiles. "Essentially. This one was painted by an indigenous artist. When I bought it, I had the honor to meet the artist and they told me about their encounter with this particular creature as a child."

"I can only imagine how terrifying that must have been."

"They admitted that much of their depiction is clouded by childhood fear and time."

She can't break her eyes away from the rows of sharp teeth filling the creature's unnatural grin. "Why did you collect this?"

"Curiosity," he shrugs. "Why are any of us interested in the North? It's one of the few remaining places with any mystery left."

Something about the way he says this pulls Vic's attention away from the painting. She hadn't considered it before but she wonders briefly if her own reasons fall into the same category. "I suppose you're correct."

"What about your intentions? There must be more than old ruins that intrigue you."

Startled by his directness, Vic looks over at Robert in surprise. "I hadn't considered it before. Ever since my father told me about it, I've wanted to go."

He smiles softly at her. "Sounds like curiosity runs in the family then. What did he teach you?"

She begins to run her fingers along the edges of the small silver locket around her neck. "He told me about what the storm was like. How the night can last for days in the winter. That people see things in the darkness that may not actually be there."

"None of that terrified you?"

"Yes and no. It sounded terrifying, but I wanted to know everything I could."

Robert clears his throat as he looks down at some papers on his desk. "You'll learn more than you likely bargained for with this collection. Take every chance you can to study it and perhaps you'll find your way there in the end."

"I will. I've been working towards this my whole life." Robert can't help himself and chuckles at her determination.

A moment of silence elapses between them. She meets his soft brown gaze and blushes despite herself. He, on the other hand, maintains his amusement with her passionate attitude as he leans back into his chair.

"I hate to cut this conversation short, but there is some actual work I need to attend to. Do you think you can find your way back downstairs on your own?"

Vic rises and nods to Robert. As she opens the door to leave, she turns back to him with a smile. "Will I see you at dinner?"

“Sadly, no,” he frowns and looks out over his desk. “Emily will make sure I’m fed. She always does.”

Vic frowns lightly as she had hoped to repeat the amusing dinner they had the night before. She closes the door softly behind her and as she does so, Robert runs a hand through his hair. He stares at the spot she had just been in and sighs to himself.

“She’s going to be trouble, Robert.” He says to himself before shaking his head and starting in on a stack of documents.

CHAPTER FOUR

Within a week Vic has assumed the roles of sous-chef, maid, and part-time secretary. It was an exciting change of pace for Vic, who had gotten used to the quiet confines of university work.

Today, Emily had given her the task of visiting the grocer and picking up ingredients for dinner. The walk had been crisp and cool --- the first hints of autumn coming in --- and Vic had been thankful for the breeze as she returned. She had been sent to procure a hefty summer squash, along with other provisions, and now regretted not grabbing an additional bag to carry things home in.

As she approaches the gate to the house, she sees the mail carrier just down the lane and waves over to him. He waves back, slipping a few letters into the neighbors mailbox. Vic takes the opportunity to put her heavy burden down and rest a moment.

She leans against the ivy-covered stone wall as a gentle breeze rustles through it. Loose hair tickles her cheeks and she giggles slightly in spite of herself as it does. A yawn follows as she swipes the hair off her face.

“Great day for a nap in the garden, I say.” The mail carrier says as he hands her a small stack of letters.

Having been caught, Vic flushes a bit in embarrassment. “I hadn’t realized how tired I was.”

“If your master allows it, enjoy the day, miss. Weather’ll be changing soon and won’t be too many more days like this ahead.”

Vic’s cheeks turn pink at the thought of Robert catching her sleeping under the oak tree out front. “Thank you, I’ll keep that in mind. Take care and enjoy the weather yourself.”

“Aye, bags just ‘bout empty.” He tips his hat to her and heads off, “Be seeing you.”

Heeding his advice, Vic slips through the gate and collapses at the roots of the oak tree. It shades much of the eastern half of the yard, its leaves providing ample coverage from the afternoon sun. From her position she can see that both Emily and Robert have the curtains drawn in their respective rooms.

For a moment she listens to the sounds of the day around her. Birdsong echoing through the tree above her mingling with the soft sound of the wind in the boughs. Autos pass by every so often, their motors rumbling down the lane as they go on.

Off in the distance, Vic can make out the sounds of neighborhood children shouting and carrying on.

Vic leans her back against the tree and closes her eyes. She feels a tiredness behind her eyes and gives into it without a second thought, letting it envelop her in a brief moment of nothingness. Submerged in this inner world of peace she lets herself be carried away by fantastic daydreams until the tolling of the university bell rouses her back into the current moment.

She struggles against slipping right back into unconsciousness, but manages to blink her eyes open. As she yawns, she brings her hands down onto the stack of letters beside her.

The stack itself is thicker than the last few days and Vic wonders just how many people have business with her new employer. Out of curiosity, she decides to see who would be writing to the house. The first few letters appear to have been sent from auction houses and banks, nothing too out of the ordinary.

It's the next four letters that are strange to Vic. Three of them bear the name of a female returnee while one remains unmarked. She turns the letters over in turn and discovers a variety of seals: a kiss, a rose, a dagger, and a pair of majestic dueling lions on the unmarked letter.

"Oh, did today's mail arrive already?" Emily asks from the porch, slowly making her way over to Vic.

"The carrier was just coming by with it when I arrived home." Vic waves the few business letters. "Mostly business. Though there's a few odd ones mixed in today."

"Odd how?" Emily asks as she sets herself down next to Vic.

"These three," Vic hands over the three letters with strange seals, "all seem to be private. I assume by the one with the dagger that he's gotten himself into some hot water."

Emily looks them over and laughs to herself. "Robert has an unfortunately easy time with people, women especially. He used to be quite the rake."

"Unfortunate how?"

"This isn't the first pile of love letters --- or declarations of eternal hatred --- he's received from someone who's felt slighted. He can be very charming when he tries and women have tended to misread that as interest."

"But you said yourself that he was a rake?" Vic crinkles her nose at the word, finding it somehow distasteful.

Emily smiles wistfully and gazes up at the boughs. "If he ever decides to use his charm again, you'll understand. I wouldn't worry. He isn't like that anymore."

“What changed?”

Emily shrugs and looks back over at Vic. “Hard to say. We moved here and things changed. My guess has always been that he was serious about settling here.”

“He was a rake and a wastrel then?”

“I wouldn’t be so harsh on him, Vic. Time changes all of us for good or ill. He wasn’t a wastrel, even when I first met him, but he needed to make connections. Sometimes that means putting on airs to get others interested.”

“Does he read these at all then?”

“No, it’s best to just burn those. Any other strange letters?”

Vic sets the letters from old acquaintances aside and produces the unmarked letter. “This one has no return address. There’s also this very intricate lion seal on it.”

Emily snatches the letter from Vic, much to her surprise. “These should go to Robert immediately.”

“What are they?”

“It’s a personal matter.”

Vic furrows her brow. “How do you know? There’s barely any information on it.”

Emily gets to her feet, grabbing the squash and groceries as she does so, and she begins to head towards the house. “There are some things about the running of the house you don’t know quite yet. This is one. Please trust me on this.”

“Why won’t you tell me about it then?”

Emily stops halfway into her initial ascent of the porch and turns to look at Vic directly. “If Robert wants you to know, he’ll tell you when he’s ready. Until then, it isn’t my business to discuss, Vic.”

Vic beats back the impulse to press the issue as her frustration flares. Emily keeps her eye on Vic for a moment longer before turning and heading inside. Once Emily is out of sight, Vic leans back against the tree trunk in defeat.

She looks down at the letters in her hands, turning them over again to look at the seals on the back. A rose. A kiss. A dagger. For a moment she traces each seal with her fingers, contemplating their contents and letting her frustration burn out.

All of a sudden she takes a look around her. From the street she can hear Johann’s hurried footsteps approaching, his shoes clicking against the cobblestones. Hastily she stuffs the letter with the dagger seal into her bag and gets up.

“Back so early?”

He tilts his head at her. "I thought I heard the clock strike four?"

Vic takes a look down at her watch and sees it's already nearly a quarter past the hour. "You're right, I lost track of time it seems."

"You feeling alright?" Johann steps closer to her and gives her a quick look over.

"Emily scolded me about the mail, of all the things." She gives an exasperated sigh, trying to calm herself down.

"I'm sure it's a minor misunderstanding, Vic. Whatever it was, by dinner everything will be fine. She forgives easily." He pats Vic's shoulder consolingly.

"I hope so. I just hadn't realized there were secrets."

At this mention of secrets, Johann draws himself up, carefully observing her reaction. "There aren't secrets, per se. You've been here a week, give it time before you learn everything."

They begin moving in the direction of the house, Vic in the lead. She doesn't continue the conversation, realizing that the information she's after won't be easy to get. Johann keeps an eye on her as she heads up the porch stairs and into the house.

Vic climbs the two flights of stairs up to Robert's office and knocks softly at the door. He beckons her in, not rising from his desk. Before him is a small piece of paper filled with pointy handwriting. As Vic approaches, he hastily hides it under a stack of other papers.

"Emily forgot to bring you these." She lays the business letters down in front of Robert.

"Thank you." He picks one up and considers it a second before putting it back down. "Vic, I think starting tomorrow I'll have you work on cataloging."

Her face lights up at the idea. "Really?"

"Yes, really. You seem to have taken quickly to whatever Emily has thrown at you." Robert smiles at her and moves over to the door.

"Any place I should start?"

"It's probably best that you familiarize yourself with the book collection first."

She follows him out the door and down the stairs. "How do you want me to sort things?"

"For now, general categories should do. I don't expect you to know all the nuances of everything just yet."

"I just wouldn't want to sort anything in a way you couldn't find it."

He laughs at the statement as they walk into the office. "I can't find anything as it is! I'm sure you'll be able to figure out a system for everything."

She allows him to walk her over to a nearby pile of books, blushing all the while. "I'll do my best."

"I'm sure you will," he reassures her, patting her shoulder. "I'll check in on things before dinner, how's that?"

"So you'll be joining us tonight?"

He smiles at her. "Yes, I'll be joining everyone tonight."

As he turns to leave, Robert catches a spark of excitement in Vic's eyes, turning them more green than hazel for a moment. The smile falls away from his face as he hesitates at the door. She tilts her head at him, the spark gone.

"Something wrong?"

"No," he says in a rush and she swears she sees a slight flush begin to creep up his neck. "I'll be back in a couple of hours."

With that, he swiftly leaves the room and Vic can hear his footsteps hurriedly climb the staircase back to his office. For a moment longer she stares at the spot he had just been in, letting a smile creep across her face before turning to the stack of books nearby and settling into the task at hand.

Vic had been staring at the same page for the last half hour, she was sure of it.

She had been organizing the language books into sub-categories when a primer on the native languages of the North had caught her attention. It had promised to explore the relationship between mythos and language. The chapter she had blindly turned to outlined how a word for a mythological weapon could be found in multiple native dialects, suggesting they had all spoken the same language at some point.

The chapter was dense and full of terminology that Vic tried to bluff her way through. Halfway through was a description of the weapon --- a huge curved blade with hooked tip, fishing lures dangling from its hilt --- and how it was used almost as an all-purpose tool. Following the description was a brief recounting of an epic tale of the blade in use.

Vic let her mind wander from the page and drift into the story, imaging how the ice giant depicted in the story had used the blade to rend the mountain range in half. In her mind she could conjure up an image of the Great Giant Range with it's nearly perfectly flat split between its northern and southern halves.

She never hears Robert knocking at the door.

"How goes the progress today, apprentice?"

"Ah," Vic starts and turns to look behind her, "you've caught me."

Robert peers over her shoulder and skims the page. "Oh, the discussion on Mal'nuk. Linguistically, I'm not sure I would've chosen that tale to make my point, but it's a fair point nonetheless."

"I, ah, I've never actually heard the story."

"Really?" A grin crosses his face as he turns around and surveys the room. "These are all organized by subject, correct?"

"Yes, loosely. There were some that I couldn't classify, so I stopped to get better familiarized."

"Perfectly fine. Where can I find the mythology books?"

Vic points to a healthy collection of books and artifacts at the far end of the room. Robert marches over to them and begins undoing any work Vic had done. She begins to say something but thinks better of it, more interested in what he's looking for than in being upset over redoing work.

Eventually, after a minute of searching, he straightens up with a book in his hands. Robert rapidly flips through the pages to find whatever has him so animated. From the dark corner of the room, he beckons her over and Vic happily moves closer.

"This is the story of Ehkun," he states, handing the book over to her. "He's the ice fisher god they discuss in that book. His story was the first of the ice fisher gods, as far as we can tell."

She begins to scan the page. "Gods? I thought they were just ice giants."

"Each tribe has similar but different gods and monsters. Some scholars have chosen to collectively lump them together as giants, rather than gods."

"Why?"

"There are a lot of creature stories up North, as you know. The tribes worship the ice fisher gods more out of fear than reverence. In the past, there was a tendency for non-indigenous scholars to interpret the stories as creature stories due to this fear."

"That doesn't make sense to me. I didn't think all the Old Gods were perfectly benevolent beings."

"Indeed, you'd be correct, and the younger scholars would agree with you. They quickly learned that fear is a form of respect up North."

Vic shudders. "They're all just stories, right? Even the vampyr."

"There's some room for debate there. Some say yes, others aren't so quick to rule out their existence." Robert shrugs and begins re-stacking the books he's moved.

Vic returns her attention to the tale. It's a benign story of how Ehkun used his mal'nuk blade to provide enough whale blubber for a tribe to survive the harsh winter. Nothing particularly noteworthy to Vic, until the very end.

In an author's note at the end of the tale, the author mentions the tribe's desperation as a disease had torn through their village. They mention that this god is featured in another heroic tale from the Vampyr Wars.

"What are the Vampyr Wars?" Vic wonders aloud to herself.

"Sounds like we have a lot of catch you up on."

Not realizing she had been speaking out loud, Vic starts when she hears Robert's reply.

He laughs at her and asks. "Where are the history books?"

She points over to an even heftier pile of books on the opposite side of the room. "They're organized by rough era. Anything I wasn't sure about is in the last pile."

"That seems to be the majority of the books." Robert laughs, looking at spines first before he goes digging through the books.

Vic's nose turns pink in embarrassment as she closes the mythology book and tucks it under her arm. Thankfully it doesn't take Robert long to find what he's looking for.

"This is a decent primer on the event. It briefly talks about the history of the vampyr --- or what is known anyway --- and how the tribes coordinated efforts through trade routes. There's also a brief mention of their recovery towards the end."

"Thank you," she says, taking the book from him. "Sounds thorough."

"It's the best overview to date. You'll catch up to speed soon enough, I'm sure."

Her blush spreads at his vote of confidence. "I hadn't realized so much was already known."

"So much is known, and yet so little is known." Robert remarks, moving off towards the door. "Bring the book with you, we'll talk about it over dinner"

Vic follows Robert down the stairs and into the dining room where a plate of baked squash is waiting for her. Without needing to ask, Emily brings Robert a crystal goblet full of a thick looking wine --- at least that's how it appears to Vic's eye. She tries not to focus on it and instead let her attention be captivated by Robert's animated tutoring.

Still, she finds it very odd how this strange liquid clings to the sides of the glass.

CHAPTER FIVE

The day is warm and clear, one of those last few decent late summer days before autumn rains settle in. Before Vic is a general floor plan for organizing the collection that she and Robert had designed together. She stares out the window of the collection library, watching as the post arrives and Emily hurries out to collect it before Vic can.

Abandoning the plans, she begins pacing the length of the room, the need to fidget suddenly coming over her. Though she tries to will her mind into forgetting about the strange letters, their seemingly near daily arrival over the last month consume her thoughts. Her curiosity only grows as she feels more bound to the collection while all her other household responsibilities fall to the wayside.

As she's making her fifth pass, the door bursts open and Johann strides in with a grin across his face.

He pauses when he sees her pacing but says nothing until she looks up. "Everything alright?"

Vic comes to a halt suddenly. "I was lost in thought, sorry."

"Didn't mean to distract you. Had some news that might be interesting to you."

Vic takes a deep breath, exhaling slowly. "Interesting news?"

Johann waves a small handful of bank notes wrapped in paper. "We're attending an auction for Robert tomorrow afternoon!"

Forgetting all about her brooding a moment before, Vic twirls a little in glee while Johann laughs at her. "I've never seen anyone so glad to go to an estate auction."

"It'll just be so nice to get out of the town!"

"Been awhile, eh?"

"Years. I don't think I've left town since I got here."

"Well," Johann smiles at her, "I'm happy to be your escort out for the day."

"Where are we going?"

"A bit west of Talbot. Robert expects a lot of the university crowd from there will be attending. The estate belonged to a former professor of Albright University and he had quite the private collection."

The mention of the university deflates Vic some. "I know of it. They just recently added a Northern Studies department. If Robert wants anything related to the North, it might be a fight to secure it."

"That it will." Johann nods in agreement. "Which is exactly why he wants me to take you."

"I barely know anyone at the university though!"

"It's not about who you know, but what you know. We've a limited budget and it's better to not waste it on things we'll likely get outbid on."

Vic considers his point for a moment. "I suppose not. Still, I'm not sure what sort of help I'll be."

"I'll be there to guide you if you need, don't worry."

"Thanks." She looks back out the window before asking, "Is that everything?"

"Emily wants to see you, says she's dug up more skirts for you to try on."

Vic starts towards the door. "I'll go see her now then, before dinner."

"Vic."

The tenderness in Johann's voice makes Vic stop and face him, "Yes?"

"Emily has spent a lot of time altering these for you, though she'd never say it. Just so you're aware." He looks down at his feet as a slightly pink coloring comes to his cheeks. "I think she's sorry about whatever disagreement you two had."

"Oh," the reminder of that afternoon dampens Vic's mood some. "I'll be sure to thank her."

She leaves in pursuit of Emily, fully expecting to find her in the sewing room. Johann sighs as she leaves and rubs the back of his neck. The wind outside picks up suddenly, rattling the window panes.

The next morning dawns bright and clear with a brilliant sunrise, something Vic finds she has time to appreciate for the first time in a while. She and Johann stand silently on the train platform surrounded by other morning commuters. From off in the distance she can see their train approaching as if emerging from the sun itself.

A yawn escapes her as their train slowly pulls into the station.

"I told you two that you needed to go to bed." Johann murmurs to her, shaking his head.

She finishes off her yawn before replying, "I wouldn't have been able to sleep anyhow."

"Guess it's better to have learned something, then. Where'd you leave off?"

"Midwinter in Vorkta Base," Vic stretches for a moment before elaborating. "He started talking about their heating issue in the first few years, then went on to talk about early logging practices before going off on a further tangent about available energy alternatives."

Once again, Johann shakes his head. "That sounds like a Robert lesson alright."

"I..admittedly fell asleep somewhere around the talk about steam."

A blast of the train whistle covers most of Johann's laughter. "I'm sure he'll be happy to repeat himself."

Vic blushes lightly at the thought of spending another night with Robert, lost in between pages of history and myth. Their lessons had been infrequent and always tended to end with her falling asleep some time just before the first tendrils of dawn could creep into the sky.

This morning had been different. The blush deepens as she recalls how she woke in her bed, unsure when she had managed to get up there. Only the vague feeling of being carried very slowly up the stairs and the soft velvet of Robert's evening jacket on her fingertips remains.

The train comes to a halt before them, clouding them for a second in steam. A throng of passengers disembark and rush past while the more impatient push their way in to find seats. Johann and Vic struggle in the middle of the pack, finding an empty set of benches near to a window.

As they settle in, Johann produces a packet of papers from the breast pocket of his jacket. "We have some very clear instructions on what we're getting."

He hands it over to Vic for her to review. Robert's angular script provides directions and details on the sale; an attached invitation echoes this information. The titles of a few books are listed on the obverse side.

By far the most prominent item on the list is a painting titled *The Lady of Strausberg Manor*. Robert briefly outlines the condition he's willing to buy the painting under and the upper limit of the budget they're to spend. Vic quickly scans it over before turning to the last page.

A full-page reproduction of two women locked in an intimate embrace fills the page. It is an idyllic evening garden scene, a rose covered archway opens up onto a large fountain which the two women stand before. A woman in dark colored silks dips a very pale woman in powder blue. She appears to be kissing her companion deeply,

but a pool of dark liquid gathering under the woman in blue belies a more sinister motivation.

Vic stares at it for a moment, a feeling of unease creeping up her spine. Eventually she involuntarily shivers and hands the packet back to Johann.

“Too graphic for you?” Johann asks, stuffing things back away.

“There’s just something unsettling about it. Why does Robert want all these gruesome images?”

“He enjoys the lore,” Johann deflects quickly before moving on. “Do you know anything about Lady Strausberg?”

Vic shakes her head but offers a guess, “She was a vampyr?”

“If Robert is asking for art, you can almost bet on that.”

“Such an odd collection...” Vic murmurs softly.

“He has his reasons. With our lady here, she was the first vampyr of nobility outside of...” Johann suddenly trails off.

“Outside of what?”

He clears his throat. “Outside of rumors of others. She lived in secret and would hold elaborate masked parties. Scholars suspect this is where she would find victims.”

Once again, Vic shivers at the thought. “Sounds dreadful.”

“People would report going to these parties and waking the next morning with puncture marks on their necks. They would have very few memories of the evening. What they did remember tended to be very pleasant.”

“Did no one suspect anything?”

“A few wondered, yes. Lady Strausberg had no husband either, which became more of a concern since it wasn’t common. Later, she would be exposed as a lesbian.”

Vic frowns and crosses her arms. “That seems like the least of their worries.”

“Times were different then. People were desperate for signs of strangeness to mean danger. In this case, they were right, but they wouldn’t know that until the party in the image.”

“That actually happened?”

Johann leans back in the bench. “It’s an artist’s interpretation of it, but yes. She was caught by Lord Applegate, a close friend of hers who had attended the party. The

shock of seeing his friend with her teeth deep into another woman's lips broke him out of whatever trance the party had on him."

"I wouldn't blame him for feeling betrayed."

"He exposed her to the court soon after but there was doubt about her having harmed the guest pictured. She was eventually exiled and stripped of her title for her lesbianism, rather than being a vampyr."

"Barbaric. What was so wrong about being a lesbian back then?"

Johann shrugs and the train begins to slowly pull away from the station. "Different time, different morals. This happened in the basin city of Tzarchen, near the Great Giant Range. They had taken in a lot of refugees from the Vampyr Wars and were wary of what they considered oddness."

"Was this during the wars then?" she asks, yawning suddenly. "Oh, so sorry."

Johann smiles gently at her. "It was well into the post-war era. Why don't you rest a bit more? We won't be there for a couple of hours."

Vic leans her head against the side of the car, letting the gentle sway of it lull her thoughts. She imagines herself attending one of these elaborate dinner parties, full of strange guests all masked and merry. As she dances in dreamy circles around the room, she spots the Lady Strausberg coming towards her with her face contorted in the same way the painting in Robert's study had been.

A jolt of the train wheels on the track startles her awake before Lady Strausberg can reach her. Vic shakes her head clear of the half-dream and closes her eyes once again. Eventually she manages to drop off to sleep, forcing her mind to think of anything other than the vampyr.

CHAPTER SIX

Johann gently wakes her once they begin to pull into the station. Vic grumbles lightly but blinks her eyes clear as the train comes to a halt.

They begin their walk towards the auction in silence. Vic lags behind Johann somewhat, finding it difficult to keep up with his long strides. It gives her a moment to appreciate the scenery around her.

Unlike being home in Westford everything seems to be more planned and deliberate. Brick homes line the perfectly straight streets, each corner lot boasting some sort of business or shop. There are fewer trees and the ones that are planted are surrounded by retaining walls, all perfectly placed along the sidewalks.

They have no trouble navigating the grid-like streets to find the auction manor. Unlike the other homes in the area, the manor includes a wrought-iron gated front lawn currently overflowing with items out on display. Peering through the large front windows, Vic can see the auction has already begun though only a few are in attendance.

“Looks like we’re just in time,” Vic says as she catches up to Johann, who nods his reply.

“We should split up and see if we can find any of these items.”

“Good idea,” Vic agrees. Johann hands over the list to her. “I’ll start upstairs and meet you in the auction hall?”

Johann nods, beginning in on a stack of books that have no obvious titles on the spines. Vic picks her way through the small group of curious buyers slowly making their way through the outside items.

She ascends the grand central staircase to the more empty upper landing. The home is only two, fairly large, floors but most of the rooms on the upper story have been closed off from the curious. Only the three rooms at the back of the house appear to be open to visitors.

Various sculptures and paintings make up the collection in the first room. She begins to pick her way through a stack of paintings near the door, noticing that whoever sorted the collection didn’t do so by any logic she can figure.

Landscapes are mixed with portraits. Modern interpretive art is scattered into collections of classical style scenes. The eccentricity of the collection reminds her of Robert’s.

When she doesn't immediately notice the painting Robert requested, she heads back to the landing and towards the library at the end.

The collection of books is staggering. Built-in bookshelves run the length of one wall, easily wrapping around to the other. Piled in the center of the room on a long table is a collection of scrolls surrounded by various globes that record different periods of time.

She immediately begins on the lots of books that are housed in the bookshelves. Tags stick out sporadically from between the books, each listing the titles contained within each lot. Once again Vic has no idea how they were sorted as the titles they were sent to find are scattered across several different lots.

Finding the lack of organization frustrating, Vic abandons this task as well and turns towards the collection at the center of the room.

There are only a handful of globes and Vic quickly dismisses them as not important. She randomly chooses one of the many scrolls, removes its closure, and unrolls it only slightly. An involuntary gasp escapes past her lips as she quickly unfurls the rest.

"It can't be," she whispers to herself in awe. "It's got to be a copy."

She finds the map makers mark hiding in the bottom right corner, which to her eye seems to be genuine and fuels her on. The date of creation matches that of the first expedition North. All the tribes are marked with their trade routes between the mountains denoted in hash lines.

Then she spots it. A tiny detail that would otherwise go unnoticed: a small ink blot that resembles the head of a wolf. Vic can't contain herself and almost rushes the map out to Johann.

Instead, she glances around the room quickly to see if anyone is watching and neatly rolls the map back up. The tag attached to the collection marks it as a complete lot to be sold together, so Vic tucks it behind the other scrolls, hoping to keep the secret safe. She checks the tag again, muttering the lot number to herself as she marches out of the room and back downstairs.

A small crowd of people have finally gathered in the auction room. There isn't an available seat left and many line the walls or spill into the hallway. Gently she pushes her way through the crowd, making her way to the back of the room to wait for Johann.

"Our next lot," the auctioneer announces, "is Lot 21. This is the entire collection of the late J.D Hallinger's works. These books are in excellent condition, minimal wear on only a few corners. We'll begin the bidding at 100 notes."

The author isn't one that Vic is familiar with but is well-known with the small crowd of bidders. It doesn't take long for the price to climb. Finally, after a few moments of

intense back and forth, a man in a very smart looking suit concedes to a fresh-faced student for the sum of 300 notes.

“Congratulations to number 13. Your items will be available at the back of the house. Thank you.” Is all the auctioneer says before moving along to the next lot of books.

Before the bidding for the next lot begins, Johann pushes his way through the crowd that has gathered in the doorway. Vic gives him a small wave as he scans the room and in return he points towards the room behind her.

Using the excitement of the next item, Vic delicately makes her way into the adjoined room at the back. Much like Robert’s home, it appears to have been a former dining room that has been converted into a registry and pickup. She approaches the nearest unoccupied clerk, who smiles up at her as she does.

“Afternoon, miss,” the clerk greets in a perky tone. “Are you here to register?”

“Yes.” Vic replies simply, suddenly unsure how to proceed.

The clerk smiles. “Wonderful. What was your name?”

“Victoria Halloway.”

The clerk scans the list, muttering her last name on repeat until they reach the bottom of the list. “Apologies, miss. I don’t seem to have a Halloway on my list.”

A familiar deep and buoyant voice replies from behind her. “Our reservation should be under Brice. For two representatives.”

Once again the clerk checks their list, this time quickly spotting the name at the top of the list. “Ah, yes, the Brice Traders. Excellent.”

The clerk turns behind them and grabs a paddle numbered 5 from a small stack piled on a spare end table. Vic turns to look at Johann as he takes the paddle.
“Thank you.”

They step out of the small line that has now formed behind them. “Did you find anything on the list?”

“There are so many books, it’s difficult to get through them all.”

Johann frowns and rubs at his beard. “And they’re all sold in lots. I found a few titles he wants, but they’re all broken into different lots.”

“It doesn’t seem like they took the time to organize.” Vic murmurs so the clerks won’t overhear her.

“Yea,” Johann agrees, moving them closer to the auction hall. “Any luck on the painting?”

"No. Once again everything seemed to be scattered into unrelated lots." She leans in close to whisper to Johann, "I did find something very rare but not on the list."

"What is it?"

She glances around the room quickly before revealing, "They have an original Einhauser map from his first expedition to the North."

Vic pulls away, a confident and triumphant grin on her face. When Johann doesn't immediately respond with the anticipated enthusiasm, her smile fades.

"Einhauser?"

"He was the cartographer for some of the early expeditions with General..." she pauses for a moment, twisting a curl around her index finger as she tries to remember. "I can't remember who, but he was in those early groups and I'm pretty sure this one is genuine!"

"General Rothbard?" Johann asks, then shakes his head before Vic can respond. "You don't sound too sure about this."

"I don't think anyone else knows about it. It's in a lot with a bunch of other maps, I just happened to pull the right one."

"If we're going to get anything it should be what Robert wants."

"We'd spend a fortune that way!" Vic protests, her voice rising enough for the crowd gathered at the back of the hall to hear. A couple students turn to glare at her and she immediately lowers her voice again. "Besides, the map is worth more than what we'd spend anyway, he could afford to buy all the books he wants."

Johann frowns and says nothing, turning his attention to the front of the auction room. A lot of fine dining ware and serving ware is quickly sold to a sweet looking housemaid. The lot garners little attention from the crowd, most seeming to be scholars salivating over the chance to scoop up something rare.

As he watches the exchange, Johann sighs and rubs the back of his neck. It's obvious that everything they ultimately are here to find will be a fight.

"Alright," he finally acquiesces. "You're explaining this to him when we get home, however."

He watches as Vic's face transforms from frustrated disappointment back into excitement. She clasps his arm and excitedly whispers, "Thank you, yes, of course."

Immediately, Vic walks over to the nearest clerk who doesn't seem too preoccupied. They don't notice Vic approach, their focus currently on a long list of items. She clears her throat gently to gain their attention.

"Excuse me," the clerk looks up at her, a bit annoyed at the interruption. "Would you be able to tell me when the lot of maps will be up?"

They sigh but quickly begin scanning their list. "I can't say for sure. We have several large lots of books to get through first. Maps after that."

"Any guess at a time frame?" She timidly asks.

Their eyes narrow. "I said I can't say for sure. Likely the next hour."

"Thank you." She murmurs and slinks away back towards Johann.

A few more lots of general housewares and furniture sell off quickly. Some of the more junior members of the scholarly group bid for the desks and spare bookshelves, but none exceeding what a meager budget can afford. It isn't until the next lots of books that things turn fierce.

She and Johann watch on as the early lots create a competition between students and those that represent the institutions they attend. Under the gaze of their professors, professor's aides are weaponized against their peers. They hurl insults at their peers, using academic and economic standing to intimidate as the auctioneer calls bids from other competitors.

"Sold!" The auctioneer finally declares. "To Professor Gerrund. Is this on the university's account?"

"Indeed," replies a balding rotund middle-aged man who smiles contentedly to himself.

Vic involuntarily lets out a low groan. "Not him."

"You know him?" Johann asks.

"He's the head of the new Northern Studies Department at Albright University." She shakes her head and tries to keep her focus forward, "He visited a few years back to give a speech about something, I can't remember now. Half-way through the question period, he insulted a student for their question and they left crying."

"Over a question?" Johann looks at her in bewilderment.

"Yea. He explained it to the student like she was a child before insinuating that they shouldn't let women into the academy. Then loudly laughed that it was clear the committee hadn't reviewed the questions beforehand."

"What an absolute pile of garbage."

Vic nods in agreement, leaning in closer as the insults begin to get heated again.

"He makes it no secret that he doesn't believe women belong in the academic world."

"Clearly. How did he even get his position?"

"Speculation is money. His family is old and rich, which is all the universities care about."

They watch as students and professor's aides continually harass each other, much to the delight of the professors. Insults about grades and insinuations about student's families are readily lobbed like spears. Auction staff members look around the room at each other, but the auctioneer continues on calling out bids as they come, allowing the fighting to continue.

Eventually, one of the students manages to land a blow. "At least I managed to find work in a legitimate field of study, instead of buying my way into a invented one!" Students around the room turn to one another and snicker.

The aide defending Professor Gerrund begins to hurl back an insult, but the professor's hand on his shoulder stops him. Slowly, Gerrund rises from his seat and the room falls silent for a moment. He clears his throat, holds up his paddle, and waits for the auctioneer to call the raise.

"Two hundred and seventy-five notes," the auctioneer responds, quickly shutting his mouth.

The professor laughs as he puts down his paddle. "The budget for this 'invented' field of study is what is ensuring you'll never read a word of these texts. I say, when was the last time the Dead Language Department invented a reason for a budget increase?"

"Ancient Languages." The student mutters angrily, fist wrapped tightly around their paddle.

"It matters very little what you call it. One day you'll end up just like your department: lost, forgotten, and dead."

No one speaks. All eyes are on the student now, waiting for a response. He hesitates, opens his mouth to respond, and throws his paddle to the ground.

The air in the room deflates as the students make way for their defeated comrade, who quickly makes a retreat to the outdoors. A few of his friends at the edge of the room rush out after him. Professor Gerrund tugs on his suspenders as he sits back down.

The auctioneer calls for challengers to the bid before declaring, "Once again, Professor, you are the winner."

"Naturally."

Johann frowns and leans over to Vic to whisper, "His face seems so punch-able."

Vic laughs into her hand. "I didn't know you were so violent."

"I try not to be," he straightens back up. "I just don't like watching others throw their weight around on the poor."

Once again they wait, watching as more and more lots of books get sold off to the unruly crowd. The battles get more fierce as students are desperate to gain whatever they can that might give them an edge in their studies. The last three lots of the first floor go for well over their starting price as students finally begin winning auctions.

It's difficult for Vic to not notice that Gerrund has stopped bidding on the remaining lots.

"Moving upstairs, we begin in the library," the auctioneer announces. "To begin, we'll start with Lot 49, a lot that features over fifteen titles and the complete collection of the works of Henry Merwin. We'll begin bidding at 300 notes."

Vic and Johann shift uncomfortably as lots of books they were sent to find begin selling. She sheepishly casts a look at Johann, aware of their many missed opportunities. Johann stares impassively towards the front as yet another lot is sold to a group of students.

After several more large lots of books, the auctioneer finally declares, "That concludes the lots of books. You may arrange for your winnings to be delivered with the clerks in the back on your way out."

Students and professors alike make their way slowly to the back of the room. Some stay put but the majority begin filing out. As they abdicate seats, Vic and Johann find a couple in the back to take.

Satisfied with things, the auctioneer begins again. "Next, on to the office furniture and decor. First is Lot 60, a collection of maps and globes of various dates and places. We'll open the floor at 100 notes."

Without thinking, Vic raises her paddle. "Yes, miss, I see you. Will anyone raise?"

For a second no one moves and Vic begins to smile to herself. Just as her confidence begins to build, another paddle goes up in the room. Their raise is called and before Vic has time to raise again, Gerrund has re-entered the battlefield much to the room's surprise.

She looks over at Johann and he nods at her, whispering, "You have up to a thousand notes to spend before we have to walk home."

Her paddle goes up immediately. "250."

"250, back to the young lady."

Amused, but not to be outbid, Gerrund continues to increase the price. It passes between the three of them until the price gets up to 500 notes. At this point the

students have begun to file back in, surprised to hear the well-known professor would waste his time on a series of maps.

As Professor Gerrund raises the price to 550, he turns in his seat to face Vic. "While I'm sure they'll make lovely decorative statements on your husband's office wall, let the experts have these, dear."

Vic does not even deign to look at him, instead raising her paddle silently. Deep in the pit of her stomach a fire begins to cackle as she hears the professor mutter a "ungrateful uneducated wench" under his breath. Gerrund raises his paddle in immediate response.

The bidding continues on in this manner until it nears the 700 note mark. Vic doesn't take her eyes off the auctioneer, raising her paddle obediently whenever the misogynistic professor attempts to gain any ground. His face progressively turns more and more red as she refuses to back down. Whispers begin going around the room, the returned students either in awe or disbelief at the courage Vic seems to possess.

"800," the auctioneer calls, acknowledging Vic once more.

The professor raises his paddle in a hurry, almost falling out of his seat. "850," he cries, "I'll raise to 850."

"Yes, sir, I see your 850." The auctioneer states, turning back immediately to Vic. "Do you raise, miss?"

For a second, Vic hesitates, the fire of her confidence dwindling the closer she gets to their limit. The room is completely focused on her now, the students holding their breath to see if she will finally take their hated professor down a peg. Gerrund turns to glare at her, his face nearly purple and the last of his graying hair disheveled.

"Going once," the auctioneer says slowly, eyeing Vic.

The students begin to despair, some of them shaking their heads and beginning to leave. The anger in the professor's face begins to subside as he smooths out his hair.

She takes a deep breath, exhaling with a force that catches the embers of her determination. Vic's hand moves on its own, once again, overcoming any resistance.

"900 notes!" the auctioneer suddenly shouts.

Gerrund turns to see Vic, paddle raised high, staring him down. She says nothing but the sharp look in her eye communicates everything. The complex dance of emotions that plays out on the professor's face is laughable as the auctioneer calls him for his response.

Gerrund gets up from his seat, breaks his paddle and throws it to the floor. He turns to Vic and shouts, "You uneducated piece of dung! Maps wont help you or your stockyard-working husband gain any intelligence."

Vic, fire-raging behind her eyes, calmly responds, "We both have more sense and intelligence to know how to treat people equally, which is more than I can say for a spoiled silver-spoon wearing bigot like yourself."

Not expecting a response, the professor stares at her with shock for a moment. It eventually gives way to outrage again as he suddenly stands and barges past everyone in the row, not apologizing for any hurt knees or stepped on toes as he attempts to burst through. The students erupt in applause all around the room as Gerrund can be heard slamming the front door on his way out to the yard.

Vic's face flushes from the attention as she gently picks her way out of their row. Students pat her shoulder and congratulate her, some even offering their thanks and admiration. Each comment makes her more and more aware of the money she's spent and the powerful person she's irritated.

"Yes, congratulations to the young woman," the auctioneer agrees, clapping along with the group. "However, moving along, we present our next lot. Lot 61, *The Lady of Strausberg Manor*. This is a genuine reproduction, personally overseen by the artist themselves. We'll begin the bidding at 500 notes."

Vic freezes at the edge of the row and looks over at Johann, who is already looking at her in surprise. Her face shifts from excitement to as white as a sheet. Johann feels his hand twitch to raise a bid, but he ultimately sighs and scratches at the back of his neck.

"Just let it go, we can't afford it," he whispers to her as he escapes the row. "Head out front, I'll arrange everything and meet you there."

Vic hands the auction paddle off to Johann and slips as quietly as possible out the door. As she does, she hears the auctioneer call another advance to 800 notes. Curiosity calls her to stay and watch til the end, but her shame marches her out onto the lawn.

As she walks down the steps into the emptying yard, she tugs at a stray curl that has found its way into her vision. Nervously she twists it around her finger again and again, mimicking her thoughts as to how to explain everything to Robert.

Distracted, she nearly wanders into the path of an attendant carrying a stack of books into the house. They swiftly move out of her way and loudly complain about the unruly students.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The train ride back home is silent between Vic and Johann. Neither too keen to relive both the successes and failures of the day. Her thoughts, much like the stray curl still twisting around her finger, had become a tangled mess of excuses that she had tried to smooth out.

As they pull into Westford University Station, she finally asks, "What should I tell him?"

"Tell who what?" Johann breaks his focus on the window and turns to her.

"Robert, about the maps."

"Oh, that." The train comes to a halt and he stands, towering over her, "Just tell him the truth."

He doesn't wait for her to catch up as he debarks with the rest of the crowd. Vic scrambles to catch up with Johann, his long strides outpacing her shorter ones. She hastily gathers her skirts to one side and rushes after him.

They make it home in record time. Vic collapses into the nearest drawing room chair, out of breath, a light sweat breaking out across her forehead.

"Wait here, I'll let Robert know we're home," Johann says as he heads up the stairs to the third floor.

Emily bustles in from her sewing room across the hall. "Was that my husband that I heard?"

Vic only nods, having not yet caught her breath. Emily looks up the stairs and then back to Vic, taking in the tension that has entered the house with them. She sighs, shakes her head, and moves towards the kitchen to fetch some water.

Vic leans back in the chair and tries to focus her thoughts once again. She picks at the same stray curl as before, tugging on it and twisting it around her finger in turn. Now that they've returned home, the dread in her stomach threatens to swallow her whole.

Emily returns with a glass of water just as Johann's heavy footsteps can be heard echoing down the third floor staircase. Vic hastily takes a sip of water, hoping it'll clear her throat which suddenly feels drier than she thought. All it does is nauseate her.

"What happened?" Emily whispers to her.

"I completely messed up." She drops the curl and greedily takes another sip of water.

A frown crosses Emily's face as Johann enters the room. They look at each other over Vic's head, communicating all that each other needs to know in a glance. Emily consolingly rubs Vic's shoulder.

"He wants to see you." Johann crosses to the chair opposite her. "He's in his study, I wouldn't keep him waiting."

Languidly, trying to delay the inevitable, Vic rises to her feet.

"Just tell him the truth, Vic," Emily advises as she heads towards the door. "He won't be upset if you're honest with him."

The two of them watch as Vic leaves, slowly making her way up the stairs. Emily moves to Johann and begins gently stroking the back of his head. He closes his eyes for a moment, listening to the sound of Vic's slow shuffles and letting his wife soothe him.

Eventually Emily asks, "What happened, my love? You two are acting like someone died."

He chuckles and puts a hand on her forearm. "Nothing so dire. I left Vic to find the painting Robert wanted, she missed it, and ended up buying a lot of maps instead of anything he wanted."

"Oh, that won't make him very happy. It's hardly worth the stern attitude though," Emily frowns.

He reassures her by rubbing her arm. "Even if we had bid on it, it and all the books sold for far over-budget. The auction was apparently popular with the academic crowd."

"Still." Emily gazes off in the direction of the entryway. "Don't you think it's a little cruel to make her worry?"

"Maybe, but it seems to me that she wants to worry about it."

Emily kisses the top of his head and takes the seat Vic had been in. "It can't be helped then, I suppose."

"She's going to be fine."

"I know, I just don't want her to work herself up into leaving."

"Oh, sweet love," Johann laughs and crosses to her, picking up one of her hands. "I don't think Robert would let her quit over something like this."

Emily looks up at her husband and lets his sweet smile melt her into the chair. He kisses her hand tenderly before falling to his knees before her. As he rests his head in her lap, she gently strokes his head and smiles.

Vic hesitates at the office door, fist hovering in the air. She takes a deep breath and closes her eyes for a second. As she exhales, she lets her fist land on the door, hoping that maybe Robert didn't hear.

"Come in," is the reply, however.

Delicately she opens the door, only peeking her head into the room. "Johann said you wanted to speak to me?"

Robert gestures for her to enter more properly and points to the seat across from him. Vic makes her way around the door and begins the process of closing it as slowly as possible.

As she sinks into the chair provided, Robert begins pacing behind his. "Johann told me that you didn't have much success at the auction."

Vic offers up nothing, only nodding her head in response.

"He said that you made an executive decision," Robert pauses behind his chair, looking directly at her. "Care to share what that decision was?"

She shifts in her chair and looks down at a spot of rug in front of the fireplace nearby. She resists the urge to tug at the stray curl in her vision. Her mouth opens to speak a couple times, but the words seem determined to not produce themselves.

"Vic." Robert sighs. "Please help me understand what happened today."

"I outbid Professor Gerrund for a lot of maps."

"Start from the beginning." After a second look at her face - eyes wide and pleading - he runs a hand through his hair, "Please."

She props her elbow on the armrest of the chair and begins twirling her curls again. "He was there, buying up all the books. Everyone was. And they were all in different lots, so it was just going to cost a lot to get all of them anyway."

"Vic." His voice washes over her, chilling her as he stares at her intently

"I saw the maps and I just thought..."

"You thought what?"

She drops the curl and meets Robert's eye. "They're rare, Robert! Maybe more rare than that painting!"

He frowns at her. "I doubt that. Very few reproductions of that painting exist, that was one of five."

Frustrated that he doesn't seem to want to let her off the hook, Vic gets to her feet and begins pacing along the edge of the rug. "I couldn't just pass it up! The Einhauser maps have been in private collections for forever, this was the perfect chance. And Gerrund was there being just a complete pile of classist misogynistic trash and everyone knew it. This whole Northern Studies position has clearly just inflated his ego, the self-assured booteel licking pile of..."

"Vic!" Robert roars as she carries on. She stops in her tracks and her hand involuntarily begins playing with her curls again.

He runs a hand through his hair. "Please, I am *trying* to understand. Who is Gerrund?"

Vic tries to calm the burning shame in her chest with a deep breath. As she goes to move her hand away from her face, she finds the curl she had been playing with has become too tangled to let her finger go. She gives it a tug but the tension on her scalp tells her it refuses to budge.

Robert tries not to laugh at the scene. He hides his bemused grin behind a hand.

She tries once more to tug her finger free from her face before giving up. "He's the head of the new Northern Studies Department at Albright University. He was buying up all the books at the auction. None of the students even had a chance."

"Well, that only accounts for the books. That still doesn't explain how you missed the painting or what these maps have to do with it."

"I missed it, ok?!" Vic exclaims, dramatically sinking into her chair. "I didn't see it! It was so crowded over and I don't know, it must've been tucked in the far back."

He rests his elbows on the desk top and peers at her from over his steepled fingers. "And where do the maps come in?"

"I saw them and thought they might be interesting. Everything else seemed so old."

"For someone who came from the university, I would expect more reverence for antiques."

"I do have respect for them! Things were crowded, the lots weren't organized well at all. It was like they just threw things together at the last minute."

"What was in the maps that was worth nearly the entire budget I gave you two?" An undercurrent of disappointment finds its way into his voice.

Vic gives her curl one final tug and it finally lets her finger go. "I used to catalog maps for Professor Simmons and I thought I'd take a look at the collection they had out. I wasn't expecting to find anything of value!"

"You mentioned Einhauser?"

"Yes!" Her excitement sparks in her voice. "I couldn't believe it but I checked the map maker's mark and everything! The wolf's head blot was there, which means it's a genuine copy of his first expedition."

Robert sighs, leans back in his chair, and strokes his beard. "Great."

"It's worth a fortune, I'm sure!" His lack of enthusiasm once again dampening her spirits.

"No doubt," he waves a hand dismissively. "That isn't really the point of the collection though. I probably already have a reprint."

"You don't," Vic insists. "I've looked over everything in that room at least once and I haven't seen a single map."

"This wasn't for selling off, Vic."

"Then why are you so fixated on this painting then?"

Robert gazes over at the fireplace. "It's personal."

"Right, personal." Vic rolls her eyes and begins the process of untangling the curl she had been caught on.

He frowns. "I don't get pleasure out of this, Vic. This isn't for profit."

"Then why do it? It's not as if you're submitting independent research."

"It isn't up for discussion."

Vic abandons the struggle to untangle, turning her attention to Robert. "What is?"

"What you're going to do to fix this situation."

Her mouth falls open and an involuntary offended gasp escapes her. "Fix it? Why can't we talk about what this collection is about?!"

"Because," he slams a hand down on the table, using it to leverage himself up. "I don't want to discuss my personal curiosities to satisfy a worker's inquisition."

Vic closes her mouth as she watches Robert pace over to the window. The world outside carries on despite them; autos rumble on the road, drunken laughter, and the distant sound of a train whistle fill the silence. Robert leans against the window frame and inhales, trying to steady his slowly growing temper.

"I thought we were at least friends." Vic finally murmurs. He shuts his eyes as her soft voice shames him.

"We hardly know one another." As soon as the words flow past his lips, Robert wishes he could take them back.

Another minute passes. Vic sinks into her chair, curl in hand once again, her fingers picking at small knots. Robert eventually takes a deep breath, sighs, and returns to the desk.

"Contact your old professor, see if the university wants the maps. For now, I want you helping Emily with her housework." He gestures her towards the door.

Vic takes the hint and marches herself off, muttering as she leaves, "Yes, sir."

The door slams behind her and her footsteps loudly echo down the hallway.

CHAPTER EIGHT

For a week, Vic goes out of her way to avoid Robert. With no evening lessons to attend it's easy for her to stay in her room with a book, reading until the words and the sounds of Robert's pacing above eventually lull her to sleep.

On the day the maps finally arrive, she wakes to find herself neatly tucked in and her book resting on the bedside table next to her. Sticking out of the book, marking her place, is a carefully folded note. The script is slanted with a slight curl to the letters, like waves coming in to lap at the shore. Immediately she knows it's Robert's handwriting and a flush warms her cheeks.

Vic, it reads, the maps are arriving in the morning. Please see that they are sold within a reasonable time frame, I do not want them cluttering up the already cluttered office. Thank you. Robert.

She tears the note in half, leaving the pieces on the floor as she goes to freshen herself up for the morning.

As she heads down the main stairwell, she is greeted by the entirety of the collection she bought crowding up the entranceway. For a moment she pauses and looks over it all, the light from the stained glass archways casting fire onto her face. Eventually she sighs and picks her way over to the telephone.

Vic has the operator direct her call to the university and a perky sounding secretary answers. "Westford University, how may I help you?"

"Good morning, this is Vic. Any chance Professor Simmons is in?"

"Just a moment!"

The line clicks over. It only takes three rings for Simmons to pick up. "Cartography Department, Professor Diana Simmons speaking."

"Morning Professor," is all Vic can manage to say before she hears Simmons gasp on the other line.

"Well, well, well." Vic can hear the joy in Simmons voice and it brings a smile to her face. "Thought I'd never hear from you again, Vic. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I've uh...come into the possession of some rare maps and thought maybe the department might be interested in them."

Over the line, Vic can hear Simmons rustling some papers about. "Bring them by the library in an hour. I have a short window free then, but I'd be happy to look them over."

"I'll see you then! Thank you!"

"I'll be in the back meeting room, it's usually open this time of day. Look forward to seeing what you've managed to find yourself in!"

With that Simmons hangs up the phone. Vic delicately sets the receiver on the hook, still smiling to herself. Carefully, she picks out and rolls up several maps and stuffs them into a protective carrying tube --- including the Einhauser map that got her into this mess. Not wasting another minute, she heads out and makes her way across town on foot.

The campus library is an older imposing square stone building that is slowly losing a fight to the ivy that climbs its walls. Two large stained glass windows frame the door, proudly displaying the school's crest. Vic makes her way to the meeting room in back as instructed.

"Afternoon, Professor." Vic greets as she enters, placing the tube of maps down on the table.

Professor Simmons smiles at her warmly, looking up from the book she had been reading. "You can call me Diana if you'd like, Vic. There's no need to be so formal now."

Vic lightly blushes but returns the warmth of Diana's smile. "I suppose not. It's good to see you."

"You as well." She watches as Vic begins the process of laying out the maps, "What have you brought me? Hopefully something interesting?"

Vic lays each of them out, one on top of the other, and uses a book to hold one corner down. "The top two maps look like a recent Jones survey of the ancestral landmarks in the Southern Isles, but I couldn't place the years. I also have some older maps and globes but these seemed to be the most interesting at first glance."

"We may already have the recent survey maps."

"Just the top one, I think. The second one looks to be more recent, it has a new ruin marked on it that I don't remember seeing on the others."

Diana beams over at Vic. "Ah, she does remember the things she's learned here!"

The tip of Vic's nose turns pink at the subtle accusation. "Of course I did! Besides, that's not what I wanted to show you."

She flips to the last map, gesturing to the maker's mark, "Is this a genuine print of Einhauser's first expedition North or am I seeing things?"

Diana cocks an eyebrow at the last map, running her fingers over it delicately. From a small bag slung across the back of a nearby chair, she pulls out a magnifying glass and holds it up to the mark. Her lips tighten as she observes the rest of it.

"It certainly could be and would be quite the piece to add to any collection." She taps the magnifying lens against her shoulder, eyes intently watching Vic's face as she asks, "Where did you find it?"

Vic sighs and lowers herself into the chair at the end of the table. "An auction I attended recently."

"This wouldn't happen to have been the same one that a certain Head of Northern Studies attended, would it?"

"You heard about it?"

Diana laughs and lowers herself into a chair next to Vic, "Heard about it? He wouldn't stop complaining about some young upstart woman. He came to visit before heading back to Albright. Absolutely insufferable."

Vic's face burns with indignation as she stares down at the map. "He was the one with the terrible attitude. Calling me uneducated and insulting students at every opportunity."

"Let's not focus on the worst among us." Diana soothes, gently patting Vic's knee. "You're attending auctions now? I assume the new job must be going well?"

"Not exactly."

The tried and true Professor Simmons scowl appears. "You left me, only to get in trouble elsewhere, Vic?"

"I didn't mean to!"

"That bad, eh?" Diana laughs at her, continuing to pat Vic's knee. "Vic, you never mean to. No one ever intends to. What happened?"

Vic explains the auction, why she had been sent there, and the fight with Robert afterwards. With each word and Diana's patient attention, the fire of her upset begins to burn brighter. As she nears the end, she finds herself more and more animated about the issue, going so far as to get up and begin pacing.

"I just don't understand," she rants, throwing her hands up in the air. "Every time I try to find out more, I learn it's another thing Robert doesn't want to talk about. Or it's something I have to ask him about. Or they just evade the question entirely!"

Diana nods along. "Secrets are being kept."

"Exactly! Thank you!" Rant complete, Vic ungracefully collapses into her chair. "What am I going to do?"

"You could leave."

"But he promised to go North!"

The statement hangs between them for a moment. Diana raises an eyebrow while Vic leans back into her chair, sighing loudly.

"Then I suggest you find out what those secrets are before embarking," she finally advises.

Vic takes a second to consider this before nodding in agreement. "Yes, but how?"

Slowly, deliberately, Diana stands up from her chair and smiles down at Vic.

"Victoria, if there's one thing I know about you with any certainty, it's that your curiosity and tenacity know no limits. Do you remember the first time we met?"

"For the interview, right?"

"No, not then." She removes the book from the corner of the maps and begins to roll them up. "A week before your interview, I saw you here. I'm surprised you don't remember. You were researching the basics of cartography and nearly walked into me."

"I forgot about that..."

"I asked if you needed help and you just said that you were studying for a big interview. I asked if you were a student, you said no, and then told me that you were hoping this interview would help you achieve your dream. I wished you luck and then left after that point."

"I spent every day here that week, trying to get ready."

"And it paid off. Your curiosity and tenacity prepared you for all the questions I had. I didn't take it easier on you in the interview just because of that moment." Diana slides the maps back into their carrying tube.

Vic looks up at Diana. "Really?"

"Absolutely," she moves away from the table before turning back to Vic. "Put your mind to figuring out the puzzle before you and you will."

Grabbing the maps from the table, Vic stands to follow Diana out. "Thank you. What about the maps though?"

Diana laughs as they head towards the front. "Let me talk to Financial and see if they can stretch my budget to cover them. At the very least, you've given me a chance to be relevant to Professor Gerrund again."

Vic groans before the two of them share a look and a laugh. They walk together to the front, sharing in the sense of relief it is to have even just one friend to recognize

who we are. As they part ways, Vic tries to keep her heart buoyed for the task ahead.

A week later, the collection is sold.

CHAPTER NINE

Despite the quick sale of the maps, Vic still hadn't been given permission to resume her work on the rest of collection. Though she had asked Robert if she could get back to organizing, he quickly told her no and then left with Johann shortly thereafter. Neither had been back for over a week.

Feeling left out, Vic had thrown her attention into the chores that Emily couldn't get to. Every day that list seemed to grow as Emily spent more and more time in her sewing room.

On this particular morning, with her hands plunged into the dirty dish water, Vic scrubs at a stubborn stain on the tea kettle. Her disgruntled thoughts about the situation tumble out of her mouth as she works. She doesn't hear as Emily enters the kitchen, the other woman's soft shuffling step covered up by her murmuring to herself.

It startles her when Emily gently places a hand on her shoulder.

"Vic, when you're done with the washing, would you mind escorting me to Doc Tobey's? I...think I'm too weak to go alone today." Emily's voice sounds like a hollow reed, all of her usual warmth replaced with soft whispering.

Any and all hurt feelings Vic may have still been harboring fall to the floor. She smiles and nods. "Of course."

Emily smiles back weakly. "I'll be waiting in the sitting room."

Vic carefully watches Emily head back through the door to the dining room. Her movements are shuffling and stiff, very unnatural compared the efficacious and gracious nature she usually has. As she returns to the dishes, Vic frowns to herself in worry.

Vic hastily finishes the rest of the dishes and collects Emily who has slipped into sleep while she waits. Though the morning fog has burned off by the time they leave, the air is still thick and muggy. Every step seems to be a chore for Emily who struggles to catch her breath in the oppressive air.

As they stop for a moment to rest, Vic begins to wonder why they hadn't tried to hire a ride. She listens to Emily's breathing as the woman takes short gasping breaths, a hand to her chest.

"Are you sure you can make it?" Vic finally asks as Emily's breathing seems to settle.

"We're...nearly...there." Each word punctuated by a breath.

Vic frowns but doesn't protest. She helps Emily to her feet and carefully keeps hold of her as they walk the last few blocks to the doctor's. With each step she tries to reassure her friend that they're nearly there.

Much like the other homes around, Doc Tobey's office is situated in the middle of a series of two-story row houses. An embankment of trees lines the street, providing some modest privacy to the upper levels of the homes. If it hadn't been for the sign on the doctor's door Vic would never have known which house they wanted.

Without taking a second of rest, Emily begins ascending the steps to the front door one at a time, gripping tightly onto the railing. She stops on each step, takes a deep breath, and begins the process of ascending the next. Just as she nears the top, the door opens and a short older man steps out to help them.

"Emily, child," his baritone blasts, "didn't you take a ride here?"

"I wanted to do this on my own," she replies with a defiant smile but her voice is still soft and shaky.

He peers at her from over the rim of his round glasses. "As you have company, I doubt that very much."

She lets him lead her up the remaining stairs and through the door before responding, out of breath after the climb. "This is Vic."

"Pleasure to meet you." Vic chimes in, bringing up the rear and closing the door behind them.

Doc Tobey turns to look at Vic, giving her a once over. "Robert's latest recruit?"

Emily nods her head, still trying to catch her breath. "Yes, she's been with us...for over a month."

"Welcome to the madness, Vic," he laughs as he guides Emily into a nearby chair, lowering her gently despite her being taller than him. "We'll rest here a minute before taking you back."

Vic spots a chair across the entryway from Emily and perches herself in it. A brief coughing fit overcomes Emily and the doctor swoops in with support quickly, holding a handkerchief to her chin. It wracks her body which suddenly appears more frail than Vic actually realized.

As she finishes her last weak cough, he leans Emily back into the chair so that she rests to one side. "Just rest, child. Let me get you both some water. Vic, care to help me?"

Startled from the scene, Vic immediately stands and follows him out of the room. She glances over at Emily as she does so, realizing that she seems far paler than she remembered.

"Forgive me, I'm Dr Elias Tobey," he says as he opens a cabinet door. "I know you're new to the house, but has she been like this long?"

"I..." Vic hesitates for a moment, trying to think back. "I don't think I ever noticed. We only stopped once on our walk for her to catch her breath, but she had been giving me more chores to do around the house lately."

He nods his head and hands Vic a glass of water. "Then let's hope it's a recent development."

She takes a sip before his words make sense. "Wait, what's wrong with her?"

"I thought you knew." Doc Tobey's mustache twitches with his surprise.

"I don't, no. She hasn't told me anything."

"Ah," with his free-hand, he smooths down his mustache and heads towards the door. "Unfortunately, as it relates to her health, she will have to tell you whenever she's ready. As her doctor, however, I'll ask you to please keep an eye on her and encourage her to come see me should she need."

Vic nods her head and follows him back out. The doctor gently wakes Emily and helps her to sip some water. It reminds Vic of a flower coming back to life after a rainstorm.

Doc Tobey dips his handkerchief into the water and gently dabs at her temples, wiping away the perspiration that has gathered at her forehead. It takes her another moment, but eventually she opens her eyes and smiles.

"I'm so sorry everyone," she says softly. "I feel fine now, honestly."

Doc Tobey tries to help her sit up on her own, but she ends up leaning into him. "You can't lie to me, Emily. Take your time."

Emily weakly waves him off. "I'm fine, Tobey. Please, I'll feel much better after."

"Alright, alright. I wont argue." He sighs but helps her up just the same.

As they start off, Vic gets up to follow them.

"It wont be long, Vic, please wait here and I'll have her returned shortly." Doc Tobey instructs from over his shoulder.

Vic sits back down and watches the two enter a room at the back of the house. She sighs and looks out the window to her left, watching people come and go. A

brilliantly red bird perches in the branches of a nearby tree and calls out to its fellows. It distracts her for a moment before it flies off and she loses sight of it.

As she turns away, her small leather bag gets caught on the arm of the chair. Vic takes it off and begins to put it on the floor when she wonders if she brought a book. She undoes the clasp and begins digging, finding the letter she was supposed to have burned weeks ago instead of the mythology book she had hoped to find.

She hears a shuffling of feet from the backroom and freezes. Once it seems like no one is moving in her direction, Vic looks back at the slightly crumpled letter with its dagger seal. Emily had said that they regularly receive letters of eternal love or eternal hate. Vic can only imagine what the contents of this letter contain.

She slides her finger underneath the crease of the letter, timidly sliding it towards the seal. As her finger nears the seal she looks around once again before hurriedly breaking it. Her face immediately flushes but she doesn't stop to consider turning back.

Stop avoiding this, Robert.

Already off to a strong start. As she reads on, the writer reveals a deal that went south nearly ten years ago. Questions are scattered throughout, repeatedly referencing this deal that never happened and questioning why he left town so suddenly. It isn't until near the end that the letter turns accusatory.

I let you into my home and gave you connections to some of the most powerful people in Oglala. You repay me by leaving me in some kind of stupor, with unexplained puncture marks on my neck, and then disappear to Westford, apparently. It took a friend of mine, the honorable Lord Leons -- whom you snuffed after meeting him, you'll recall -- to get me this address. I've now written to you several times and have received no response. As the post never returns these letters and no new owners have reached out to correct the record, I know you still reside at this residence. At least have the decency to explain events to me, you cowardly monster.

Vic reads it over one more time to capture the details. Unexplained puncture marks. A mysterious stupor. The growing sense of purposeful obfuscation within the house suddenly feels as solid as brick.

As she starts to read the letter again for more clues, Vic hears the unlatching of a nearby door. She hastily refolds the letter and stuffs it in her bag just as Doc Tobey steps out of a room behind her.

He gently clears his throat as she pretends to be brushing something off her skirt. "Vic, please, follow me to my office."

She follows him into the small parlor off to the right. A sturdy desk takes up much of the room and in-built bookshelves frame the doorway behind it. In them is a

collection of medical oddities and books, far more organized than any of Robert's collections.

Her eye is caught by a skull with incisors that seem a bit larger than normal. Doc Tobey follows her gaze and chuckles. "You must have a knack for finding the odd."

She snaps back to attention and takes the seat the doctor gestures to. "What makes you say that?"

"Well, first you find Robert and the family. Then you find my most curious piece, the replica vampyr skull." He chuckles again and sits across from her. "So you must have a talent."

"I think the odd keeps finding me."

"Could be. Could be that you're looking for it. Either way, here it is."

She briefly considers the idea, but quickly returns to the skull. "Is that truly what they look like?"

He chuckles. "Haven't you seen plenty in Robert's collection, child?"

"No. I've seen the mythology books on his shelves. And the one terrifying painting of them in his collection."

There is a sudden shift in the doctor's manner, he's no longer laughing when he asks. "You really don't know, do you?"

On edge, Vic shrinks in her chair a little. "Know what?"

He regards her for a second, peering over the rim of his glasses. "What is in the collection."

"Do you?"

Doc Tobey regards her for a minute, smoothing the edges of his mustache down with his fingers. "All I know is that he has it. What do you think of it so far?"

"It's a mess he won't let me touch."

"Isn't that what he hired you to do?"

"Seems more like I'm Emily's assistant rather than his." She crosses her arms across her chest and frowns, looking out the window on the adjacent wall.

"Given her condition, I'm thankful to you for helping."

Vic says nothing in response, choosing to continue petulantly staring out the window. They linger in silence a moment more, Doc Tobey watching her intently for how she chooses to respond. When no further questions are asked and no outburst occurs, he leans back in his chair with a sense of curiosity.

"I wouldn't worry yourself," he finally says, snapping Vic's attention back. "There's a reason he's having you hold off from it."

"Does he always keep so many secrets about himself?" Vic looks him directly in the eye, much to the doctor's surprise.

"We all keep secrets, Vic. Sometimes we're simply trying to distance ourselves from a past we'd rather not remember."

"I don't think that's true at all."

"You don't?"

"No, I don't think I keep secrets about myself."

"Hmmm," he pats his belly, "I wonder if that's true."

"What do you mean by that?" Vic's cheeks turn pink at his statement.

"Nothing worth taking offense over, child. Secrets that others keep - or that we keep - are only as bad as we imagine them to be."

"What if they're truly terrible things though?"

"What if they aren't? Is it just the fact that someone didn't tell you everything right away that bothers you?"

"I suppose so. It's just...so difficult to trust someone who won't be honest."

"Ah," he chuckles slightly, "there's the rub. We more easily trust those that appear honest with us, and assume the worst when they aren't."

"Why not just be honest then?"

"I'm far from the perfect person to ask. We hide things from others for a lot of reasons, mostly because we want to hide them from ourselves. We saw that today with Emily, for example."

She tilts her head, not following the line of logic. "How so?"

He shakes his head and sighs. "A coughing fit is a worrying sign for her. She hasn't been this sick in a long time. I take it she hasn't told you everything either?"

Vic shakes her head in response. "Nothing."

"Well," he grunts some, getting to his feet, "there's yet another secret that she will have to tell you about in her own time."

"I'm getting really tired of that," she sighs.

He laughs as he approaches the door, hand on the knob. "Try revealing something of yourself, you might be surprised how far that can go."

Without another word, he heads out the door and leaves Vic to her own thoughts. Intuitively she knows he's right, but the growing unease in her stomach won't let up. Her eyes travel to the incisors on the vampyr skull and she shivers involuntarily.

A moment later, Doc Tobey returns with a large bag in hand. Vic can hear the sound of glass bottles clinking off one another as they get jostled about. He sets it on the desk and goes to pick up the phone receiver.

"She'll be up in a moment, but I won't have her walking home." He explains briefly before calling for a ride.

As he talks with the ride company, Emily slowly makes her way into the office with the two of them. Despite her tired and slow movement, the light in her eye has returned. Vic gets up and helps her into the nearest chair.

"Thank you, Vic," she smiles, lowering herself down gently. "Hopefully you weren't waiting long?"

Vic shakes her head and the doctor hangs up the phone. "The auto should be here in a moment. Vic, please make sure this bag gets to Robert."

"I'll take it!" Emily moves to grab the bag off the table, moving surprisingly quickly.

"Nonsense, child! You know the procedure took far more out of you today!"

"Fine, but if Robert asks, I'm telling him you put us up to it." She playfully sticks her tongue out at him.

"I'm not afraid of him."

The two of them laugh while Vic watches them, clutching the bag in both hands. While she finds the moment silly, a gnawing unease begins to catch in her stomach. Instead she finds herself staring at the bag wondering what could possibly be inside that Robert would be unhappy for her to handle.

"Let's get you both outside then." Doc Tobey walks around the desk and escorts Emily out the front, leaving Vic to come up behind.

For a split second, she considers opening the bag and taking a peek before either of them could notice. A horn blast from outside startles her, however, and she hurries out hastily. Through the large front windows she can see an auto slowly pulling up along the curb.

The doctor settles Emily into the back seat before speaking to the driver. Vic slips in next to Emily, bag placed in her lap.

"You two get home safe now," Doc Tobey says as he moves around to the back of the auto. "Emily, I want to see you back in another month. Vic, you make sure she gets to me."

Vic sinks into the plush seating as they speed off down the lane. Beside her, Emily rests her head on Vic's shoulder, her eyes closing as the movement lulls her into a nap. The bottles inside the bag jostle as their short ride speeds them home.

Once home, Vic helps Emily out of the auto and into the house. They take the stairs slowly and Vic tries to convince Emily to rest in her sewing room. However, she insists on making the journey all the way into her room. With patience, Vic supports Emily one step at a time up and into bed.

"Thank you, Vic." Emily sighs as she collapses into bed. "I wouldn't have been able to make it today without you."

A tenseness in Vic's chest suddenly releases and she sits on the bed next to Emily. "I'm glad I could help you."

Emily takes Vic's hand in her cold, pale one and gives a weak squeeze. "You're a good person. I'm sorry I couldn't tell you about this before."

She squeezes back. "It's alright. We keep secrets for various reasons." She almost laughs when she finds Doc Tobey's words crossing her lips.

"I didn't want to admit to myself that it was getting worse. It had been so good for so long. Then I just got weaker and the headaches started again."

"Is it...is it treatable?" Vic timidly asks.

"No," Emily sighs. "What Doc Tobey does is the best option we have to slow it down."

"He seems very knowledgeable."

"He is," she smiles and takes a deep breath. "I was in bad shape when I met Johann and Robert. Getting in to see Doc Tobey probably saved my life."

Vic hesitates a moment and softly pets Emily's hand to soothe herself. "If I can ask, what's the issue?"

"We don't really know. Doc Tobey has done some testing but hasn't found anything conclusive, as he puts it. Each time I go back to him he does more tests, seeing if anything has changed."

"Thank you. I'm sorry for asking."

"Don't be. I should have told you sooner."

"It...scared me to see you like that today. I'd never seen you so pale or weak."

"Oh, Vic, you're so sweet." She lets herself sink further into the bed, enjoying the comforting touch. "Johann said similar once. We met on a rare good day for me. He was so cute, keeping an eye on me as he and Robert were touring the house."

"This house?"

"No, no. My family are estate agents and merchants down in the Bay Bend. Robert had initially been planning to settle there. I accompanied my father to the showing that day."

"Why did he change his mind?"

"That was my fault," she sighs. "Johann was insistent about seeing me, apparently, and he would come around most days. Not too long after we met, I took a turn for the worst and my parents were sure it was the end. Somehow he talked Robert into taking me to Doc Tobey. He then convinced my parents to let him marry me."

"Is that what you wanted?"

"Very much, yes. I know an arranged situation isn't ideal for most people but we had known each other for awhile by that point. At least a couple months."

Vic brushes away a few strands of stray hair from Emily's face. "I knew he loved you deeply, but I never would've guessed he could be so earnest."

Emily laughs herself into a minor coughing fit before responding. "When he fixates on something, he tries to move mountains."

They lapse into silence for a moment, Vic letting her thumb gently rub against the back of Emily's hand as she holds it. Emily's breathing slows and evens itself out. Vic waits a moment longer, trying to not disturb the other woman as she slowly extracts her hand.

As Vic approaches the door, she hears Emily stirring behind her. "He isn't a bad person."

She turns around to see Emily lazily looking at her, eyes half open. "Johann?"

"Robert," she mumbles in reply, curling up on her side. "He does really care."

Vic hesitates a moment, trying to decide if now is really the time to express what she's been thinking these last few weeks. "I'm sure he does. Please, get some rest, Emily," is all she says before leaving.

CHAPTER TEN

Vic sighs as she latches the door behind her, leaning against the frame for a moment. Despite now knowing one of the many secrets in the house, something still doesn't seem quite right. Her stomach gives a howl of protest, forcing her to both remember the last time she ate and the last time she'd felt so queasy.

Unable to shake it off, she grabs the bag from Doc Tobey and ascends the stairs to Robert's office.

In a surprise, the office is relatively clean. Stacks of papers are organized into piles on the desk, some of the books are back in the bookshelf, and a few pieces of art are curiously missing. Vic notices a small patch of clear desk that appears to be waiting just for this delivery.

Despite a small voice telling her how wrong it is to spy on others, Vic can't help but notice a stack of the unmarked letters sitting nearby. She quickly glances around the room before reading over the top-most letter.

Delicate handwriting fills the page but the sentences seem disjointed, full of familiar words used in inappropriate ways. A few times she spots Robert's name and someone the writer keeps calling 'the Lion' but has trouble deciphering the meaning. None of it making any sense, she tidies the pile and turns her attention back to the contents of her delivery.

For a moment, she just stares at the bag as if she might be able to see inside it without ever having to open it. Taking a deep breath, Vic unbuckles the straps on it in a haste before throwing the bag open. She grabs one of the three jars inside and holds it up to the faint light coming in from between the drawn curtains.

As the sliver of day shines through the jar's thick deep red contents, Vic's eyes go wide.

"Blood!" The color drains from her face.

She nearly drops the bottle in her shock, catching it just before it can shatter on the floor.

It takes her another minute before she can get her senses back together. She places the bottle back in the bag, hoping that if it goes back she can pretend she never saw it. Not waiting a moment longer, she quickly leaves Robert's office and dashes down the stairs to her room.

Fear spreads through her thoughts like wildfire. The letter, the skull, and the jars of blood all flickering through her mind over and over again. Each time she tries to

think of a reason or of anything else she finds another potential fire waiting to catch.

"There has to be an explanation." She mutters to herself as she drags the letter out of the bag still slung over her shoulders.

She reads the letter again, and then again, looking for any clues that might clarify anything. The image of Robert morphs with the replica skull, his teeth elongated and dripping with the letter writer's blood. It sends a shiver down Vic's spine as she tries to shake it off.

Yet even after a third reading she can't help but feel that it's all real.

Finally taking her bag off and flinging it to the floor, she finds she can't contain herself and begins pacing the length of her bed.

The blood. Emily's blood, certainly, since where else could it have come from. Which means that Doc Tobey must know as well. She remembers the way Emily suddenly had wanted to deliver the jars to Robert and the flippant way the doctor said he wasn't scared.

It briefly occurs to her that this must be the secret everyone is covering for. Why everyone is convincing her that some secrets are best left unsaid or that Robert is truly a good person.

"Of course they all know," she mutters again, pace slowing. "They're all protecting him."

Not content to ruminate in her room any longer, she heads back out the still open bedroom door and into the collection office. Everything points to him being a vampyr, she concludes as she paces towards the far end of the room.

"There has to be something in here I can use to expose it."

As she turns to march back, she notices the title of a nearby book. *The Collected Accounts of Modern Vampyr Encounters*. She snatches it and quickly heads back to her room.

Page after page of personal accounts detail all manner of things. The mental tricks people found themselves falling under without even questioning it. Skin that always seems too cold and features that inhumanely change.

Not all of the accounts are useful but she does note some common themes. Attacks happen in the night, one recalling an encounter as early as sometime in the early evening. The more recent accounts are tales of debauchery; drunken nights gone too far, women seduced away. Most of them note that the food had always been untouched. Nothing definitive, nothing concrete she can find to prove it.

Giving up, she tosses the book away from her on the bed, sulking into the pillows. Vic finally looks out the window and notices a crescent moon already hanging in the sky. Her stomach rumbles with hunger and she runs a hand over it.

A short, sharp knock startles her. "Come in."

Robert swings her door open, a smile reaching from ear to ear as he steps into the room. The image of the vampyr skull comes to her mind and Vic tries not to flinch.

"Robert, when did you get home?" Vic tries to keep her voice from shaking.

"Only an hour ago." The smile drops from his face as he takes in her distraught seeming appearance, "Are you alright?"

"Just hungry is all."

"Well then, I have excellent timing! Come, I wanted to speak to you and Johann over dinner."

He waits for her follow after him, leading the way down the stairs and into the dining room. Johann and Emily are seated next to each other, Johann staring adoringly at his wife. Vic can't help herself but smile at the two of them as she takes her seat.

Once again, no plate is left out for Robert. His crystal goblet commands her attention.

As he goes to drink from it, she watches its contents ooze towards his mouth, unlike any liquid she has ever seen before. He catches her staring as he sets the goblet down and she quickly looks away, pink seeping into her cheeks. Her stomach lurches as she gently nudges a roasted carrot around on her plate.

Johann and Emily are in a world of their own as they eat, feeding each other small bites from their plates. Robert watches Vic as she shuffles the food about on hers. His gaze adds fuel to the still raging wildfire in her mind.

Eventually Vic stops pretending to eat and sits back in her chair, meeting Robert's gaze. Something about the way his dark eyes study her both terrifies and enchants her. A slow smile creeps across his face, adding a light to his eyes, and she feels her face betraying her by responding in kind.

It's enough for Robert to break the tension, much to her relief. "Emily, how are you feeling these days?"

Emily finishes her bite in a hurry. "Better! We went to see Doc Tobey today and I still feel weak, but I can feel a difference."

"Excellent, excellent." As he raises his glass towards Emily, Vic looks back down at her plate as her stomach rolls. "Are you comfortable enough to take care of yourself for a few days?"

This gets Johann's attention but he holds his tongue as Emily responds. "Likely. Why?"

He clears his throat before answering, trying to gain Vic's attention. She continues to stare at her plate.

"I've just been invited to review the collection of the late Sir Elbert of Richeland. He was an eccentric aristocrat from old money, owned quite a bit of farm land he developed into a thriving farmers cooperative. He passed suddenly and a friend's brokerage is handling the estate."

"Richeland is at least a day's trip from here." Johann states, anticipating Robert's next proclamation.

"Indeed, yes." He frowns as Vic continues to pick at her food. "I had the pleasure of seeing his collection once, quite a long time ago now. He was fascinated with the indigenous cultures and their agricultural methods, among other things."

"When are you proposing to leave?"

"In two days time. The public sale is scheduled for next week, but Archer has allowed us early access."

"Anything of interest we're looking for?"

Again, Robert tries to gain Vic's attention, this time raising his voice slightly as he says, "He had quite a few pieces relating to the vampyr of Calcifor Mountain that I was hoping to add."

It instead has the opposite effect as Vic's disgust with the topic grows. Her breath becomes a bellows that only serves to stoke its flames. The silver fork in her hand feels hot as she puts it down as neatly as possible.

"We'll need three tickets. Emily, hopefully you can find something professional for Vic to wear."

"I'm sure there's something I can fix up, yes." Emily replies softly, coming out of her world with Johann and noticing the tension building in the air.

"Thank you."

With that, he snatches the goblet off the table, nearly spilling some of its contents onto its naked surface. As he walks off, Vic finally raises her head to watch him leave. His shoulders round forward as he keeps his head down, looking at the floor. A momentary pang of guilt cools her temper.

Shaking it off, she turns to Emily who looks at her with some concern. "I think I'm finished as well."

Emily glances at her plate. "Are you sure you're feeling well? Do you want to take the rest upstairs to your room?"

Vic shakes her head and starts off out the doorway. "Just not hungry."

Neither Emily nor Johann question her as she heads off. Instead, much like the first night they all had dined together, they share a knowing look. Johann shrugs at his wife and goes back to his food while she picks at what's left of hers.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Vic finds sleep difficult to come by that evening. Robert's footfalls from above constantly jolt her awake as she tries to drift off. After an hour of trying and failing – her heart pounding wildly from being woken yet again – she finally grabs the book of vampyr myths from her bedside table.

A chapter discussing the hypnotic powers of the vampyr catches her eye. Several accounts detail how people would find themselves acting in ways they normally wouldn't. With each sentence she reads, Vic manages to lull herself into a restless sleep.

In her imaginings, Robert's dark eyes become deep pits of nothingness that feel as if they swallow all light from her. Caught in their pull, Vic stares at them until only darkness surrounds her and her body releases its tension.

Then suddenly the world bursts with bright white light. She shields her eyes as the edges of an imposing mountain begin to take shape. Dark clouds hang in the sky overhead.

Ahead of her, Vic watches as Robert turns into an elusive mist, leading her deeper into a swirling snow storm. She tries to follow despite the howling winds lashing snow into her eyes. The air in her lungs too frozen to cry out.

Lights appear to dot the distant mountain and she tries to move towards them, but her body remains motionless, stuck in the waist high snow. As she reaches out, a pair of strong arms wrap themselves around her and violently pull her backwards. Her paralyzed body unable to give any resistance.

She is forcibly turned to face her captor. His dark eyes wide and his mouth contorted into a smile too big for his face, Robert holds her fast to him. As she tries to move her face away from him, he grabs her by the hair and yanks her head to the side, exposing her neck to the cold.

Even the cold air of her dreams is not half as cold as the feeling of his breath on her. For a second he hovers over the exposed area of skin, letting his too-long canine teeth graze her.

He plunges his needle sharp fangs into her neck.

The pain startles her awake. Momentary panic and confusion give way to actual pain as she realizes her neck has been stuck in the same awkward position for awhile. Slowly she works out the stiff muscles before sitting up properly.

Outside, the day is cloudy and threatening to rain. She listens to a flock of geese fly over the house on their way further south. A sudden longing to join them briefly overtakes her.

For another moment she sits and listens to the day unfolding until the university bell strikes eight and she can no longer justify being in bed. Knowing what Emily has in store for her, Vic throws on only a dressing gown over her nightgown and heads downstairs.

Emily smiles as she sees Vic descending the stairs. "Morning, Vic. Glad to see you're appropriately dressed."

She offers a small smile in return. "I assumed that today I was your doll to dress."

"Exactly right." Emily beckons her into the sewing room. "I'll go fetch the coffee, give me just a moment."

They swap places as Emily bustles back to the kitchen. Her movements seem more fluid than the other day, though still with a hint of caution about them. Still, seeing her friend in good spirits erases the last of Vic's dream from her mind.

Looking at the options, Vic can only imagine where Emily had been hiding everything. Blouses, skirts, vests, and jackets are all arranged in neat piles on the chairs. Most appear to be very basic and would only need new embellishments to update them to current fashions.

Emily wanders back in with a tray of coffee cups as Vic is digging through the skirts. "Believe it or not, some of these used to be mine from only a few years ago."

Vic roughly estimates the size of the waist on a skirt by eye and does a quick comparison. "You're so thin now," she places a hand over her mouth as soon as the words leave her lips. "That was rude, I'm sorry."

"It's true though. One of the side effects of getting sicker, I suppose."

"Still, that was rude to say."

"I'm hardly offended by the truth. Every year I keep steadily losing more weight. Except so far for this one. I've somehow managed to hold on to what I have left." Emily sets their coffee down on the only uncovered table and motions for Vic to sit.

Vic moves a pile of skirts to the floor, sitting in the space they once occupied. "I'm glad for it. It really worried me to see you so frail yesterday."

"That would make three of us. Robert insisted I go over a month ago." Emily takes a sip of her coffee. "Speaking of delicate subjects, I'd been meaning to ask why your clothes are so big on you."

"They're...from my father. We didn't have much and a lot of these clothes were the last things he gave to me."

"I'm so sorry, Vic."

"Oh, no, he's still alive," she quickly corrects.

"I'm afraid I don't follow then."

Vic sips at her coffee while trying to find a way to explain things. "I grew up on a small farm in a town a few hours from here. Very rural. When I told him that I wanted to come here to find work, we had a series of fights about it for a solid week."

"It can be difficult for parents to see their children leave."

"He didn't understand." Vic feels her cheeks getting hot and takes a breath to steady herself. "He just didn't agree with my plans, is the best way to put it. Thought it was short sighted and impulsive."

"Hadn't you already agreed to work for the university?"

Vic shakes her head. "Not yet. I didn't have a place to stay or a job. I'd saved my allowance up for a year to have enough to come here. I had enough for a few months, that was about it."

Emily nods, encouraging her to continue on.

"So we fought about it. I kept trying to refine my plan and get him to agree to it, but he just didn't want me to go. Eventually I just bought the tickets and told him I was leaving in a few days."

"How did he react?"

"About how you'd expect. Furious. We spent half that night yelling at each other until I walked off to sleep in the barn."

Vic stares down at her coffee on the table, feeling the frustration from that night reignite in her heart. She grabs at a curl in her vision and begins twisting it absentmindedly.

"I didn't speak to him for two days. Not that I think he would've said anything to me anyway."

"Did he come around then?"

"Yes and no," she admits and drops the curl. "The morning I was supposed to leave, he took me into town in complete silence. He couldn't get me to the train station --- I think he just didn't want to say goodbye. Still, as I got out of the cart, he got out too and handed me a bag with a few shirts and vests in it."

"You must miss each other terribly." Emily looks at her with concern, expression soft. "I couldn't stand if that's how I'd left things with my family."

Vic shrugs, picking up her cup. "We haven't spoken in a few years. But sometimes, yes, I miss him."

"Stubbornness must run on his side then."

"He can't be too stubborn if he let me come here."

"Fair, though I hope one day you'll reconcile."

Vic says nothing as she sips at her coffee, caught in the memory of that day. The way he had roughly handed her the bag of clothes before wrapping his large arms around her. She puts a hand to her chest, capturing the last bit of her father's love in her heart.

A blast from an auto horn outside breaks her reverie.

"Would you like me to tailor your father's shirts for you? Just so they fit a bit better?" Emily softly asks.

"Yes." Vic sighs and drops her hand from her chest. "Just leave them a little big. I miss his hugs."

"Of course."

Emily smiles over at Vic, reaching a hand out towards her from across the table. The warmth of affection fills Vic as she takes her friend's hand. A feeling she hadn't been able to find in all the years she had been away from home.

They remain this way for a moment longer – hand-in-hand as they quietly sip the rest of their coffee. It's Emily who first breaks the contact. She runs her thumb over the back of Vic's hand before letting it go and moving over to a pile of nearby blouses.

"These won't be nearly as big as the ones you're used to, but I hope you'll find my things just as comfortable."

Vic smiles and finds her hand returning to the space over her heart. "I'm sure I will, Em."

CHAPTER TWELVE

They take an evening train out of town. The accommodations are modest but comfortable enough for an overnight ride. Johann hands Vic a ticket as they board and points down the car.

"I got you a cabin by yourself, I think it's down at the other end," he explains, helping quickly usher Robert into their cabin. "Go get settled and I'll grab you in a bit for dinner."

She doesn't argue and heads off with her bag to the other end of the car. Just beyond she can see into a nearly empty commuter car where only a few people are headed home at this time of day. Otherwise, the train seems relatively empty.

As she shuts the door to her cabin, it feels as if loneliness has come to box her in. The silence astounds her. Even as she stores her bag and converts the seats into a bed, the space seems to absorb every minor sound.

She collapses into the bed once it's been made. For a moment she lets melancholy drift over her.

Her eyes wander to the window where she can watch the last of the evening's passengers board their trains home. A tiny bird darts up into the rafters, calling for its friends. A flash of lightning washes out the station for a second and she loses sight of the small bird.

In the distance she can hear the low-rumbling of thunder from an oncoming storm. She closes her eyes, counting the space between each rumble as if it would tell her how far away the storm still is.

The train begins to pull away from the station, headed directly into the storm. Rain begins to lash the windows as they gather speed.

Vic can't help but imagine her father complaining. How he'd go on about his aching knees and the way they're treating her. Just like the time with the Johnson twins; how he carried on about how rude those boys could be to her.

The thought amuses her and she sits up to peer out into the dark sky overhead. In her mind, she imagines her father sitting next to her as they always did during storms, rocking in his chair and smoking his wood pipe. Another flash of lightning illuminates the world briefly and her stomach gives a low growl as the thunder rumbles.

"Don't they feed ya in that fancy house o' theirs?" She hears her father say in her mind.

"They do, pa." She mentally responds.

"Not 'nough, seems. Suppose ya have big fancy meals every night?" His disgruntled tone comforts her as she sinks back against the bed pillows.

"No, pa. Emily, Johann, and I usually eat together like we used ta."

"Aye, is that so. What about that Robert fella you've been catching eyes with?"

Vic's face flushes at her mind's insinuation. "I ain't been catching eyes with no one, pa."

"Not what it seems from here, love. Ya eat with him or not?"

"Well, no," she admits, thinking back on the few times they've all eaten together.
"No, haven't, pa."

He grumbles and in her mind she sees him cross his arms against his large chest, pipe tapping against his arm. "Don' trust no man until you've seen him eat."

Something about the statement causes Vic to start suddenly. It was always something her father just said whenever he'd talk about doing business with someone. Inviting someone to dine was just a way to finalize a deal, something she assumed everyone did at some point.

"Don't trust a man until you've seen him eat." Vic repeats the phrase to herself, keeping it alive in her mind.

In a hurry, she grabs her bag down from the rack above the bed. She flings the contents out in front of her until she finds the book she had packed. Hurriedly she begins flipping pages.

Having studied it's contents for a few days, she has a rough idea of where the information she needs is. Vic skims story after story looking for something in particular.

It isn't until the last page of the chapter on modern vampyr attacks that she finds things plainly stated.

"In the majority of modern attacks," she reads aloud softly, "it is noted that any food present had gone completely untouched."

She sits down on the bed, failing to care about her scattered belongings, and stares at the sentence for a moment longer. Untouched. Lowering the book from her face she tries to recall if she's ever seen Robert eat anything.

Vic closes her eyes as she thinks back. An image of Robert comes to mind: tall, brooding, and his handsomely dark complexion. Her cheeks flush as the image solidifies and his sincere smile spreads across the image's face.

He reaches out a hand to her and she notices that he holds his favorite crystal goblet in the other. She fixates her mind on that goblet, forcing it away from his appealing figure. Placing the goblet firmly at the dining table, her mind races through various times they've all sat at the table together.

Not a single memory includes a plate or food. Not a single memory of even a crumb passing Robert's lips. Only memories of that goblet and his smile can be found.

Vic's eyes fly open, not wanting to spend a moment longer thinking about her mysterious employer. She hastily throws her things back into her bag, mentally berating herself for having never noticed. For having let complete strangers convince her that he was normal.

She sits back down on the bed and watches the landscape go past. Once again her father's saying rattles around in her mind. A sly smile begins to cross her face as a plan begins to form in her mind.

It's an hour and a half later before Johann comes to collect Vic. Her fingers twitch and drum against the glass as she waits. With each passing moment her hunger grows and her mind creates new ways to expose Robert.

When Johann finally knocks, she bounds off the bed to throw the door open.

"I take it you're as hungry as I am then." He looks startled but genuinely pleased to see her.

"Yes." Is her short reply as she heads off ahead of him.

He chuckles and follows behind her. They pass through a few more passenger cars where only a few of the cabins are occupied. Clearly this is not a popular line.

They easily find a seat near to the entrance to the dining car. A waiter brings them a basket of bread and the menu for the evening. He's barely left the table before the two of them begin to devour the dinner rolls.

"Finally." Vic sighs after finishing her piece. "I thought you'd forgotten."

Johann laughs around the bread in his mouth, temporarily forgetting his manners. "No, Robert just kept me longer than anticipated."

She rolls her eyes but chooses not to say nothing. The waiter returns with their first course: a simple green salad with summer fruits on top.

"After dinner, he thought we could go over what he's looking for at the sale. He's working on the list now."

Vic acknowledges his statement with a nod as she savors a piece of strawberry.

"Do you know anything about Sir Elbert?"

"No."

"Do you want to know?"

She shrugs disinterestedly. "I suppose I should know something about him before we pick through his collection."

Her answer isn't reassuring to Johann, but nonetheless he presses on with the lesson. The waiter comes back with their main course of baked chicken and a side of glazed carrots. She lets Johann go on as she eats, barely giving any hint that she hears him.

"You didn't hear anything I said." He chides afterwards.

"I did." She defends herself as she grabs another roll from the basket. "He wasn't supposed to inherit the estate, since everyone thought he was the mad eldest child. It just turns out that he might have actually encountered something strange in the North. Then he inherited only because his brother happened to die of pneumonia just before his father had a heart attack, presumably from hearing about the death of his favorite son."

Johann regards her with some amusement in his jolly green eyes. "Something did make it in then."

"Then he collected all these things that Robert wants. He was the largest collector of tribal artifacts before the universities. Now that he's dead, I'm sure we'll run into our favorite professor from Albright."

"Perhaps. This is a private estate sale, so it's unlikely unless they were already friendly."

"I doubt it. Why are we going if it's a private sale?"

The waiter once again interrupts their conversation, clearing their dinner plates and leaving each a piece of berry tart. Vic absentmindedly picks a blackberry from the top and pops it into her mouth.

"Robert doesn't like traveling alone."

"Odd. Why?"

Johann shifts uncomfortably in his seat. "He manages quite a number of collections besides his own, Vic. I go with him to assist in the acquisition process."

"Is that really all?"

"Yes, Vic. Why are you pressing this?" His voice lowers, warning her to not push her luck.

"No one seems to want to tell me much about him. He certainly doesn't talk about himself much."

"He has his reasons."

"You all keep saying that."

"Vic, please, be fair." Johann tries to appeal to her rationality. "These are other private collectors and he even prefers that I don't know much about them."

"Just seems suspicious." Vic mutters, backing down and sinking into her seat.

Johann rubs the back of his neck, sighing. "I know. We're asking a lot from you to just trust us."

"That's right."

"Likewise," he says abruptly, "we have only just started to get to know you. You don't talk about yourself much either."

Vic says nothing in return, choosing instead to look out the window into the night. The storm now well behind them, the mountains cover up whatever remaining light there might be in the sky and all she can see is her reflection. A pair of disgruntled hazel eyes stare back at her.

"Why doesn't he ever come to dinner?" she suddenly asks.

"He does." Johann leans back in his chair, regarding her curiously.

"He never eats anything. Then he's up half the night pacing."

"He's always been like that."

She turns her attention away from the window and fixes him with a hard look. Johann stares back at her, brow knit together in confusion.

"He has to be hungry."

"I don't and won't speak for his eating habits, Vic. He gets what he needs."

"Don't you care? I thought you two were so close..."

Johann glares at her. "I don't like what you're suggesting and I'm finished with this conversation."

Vic's cheeks turn bright red, regretting pushing things too far. He watches her for a moment longer before taking a bite of his tart.

Neither speaks. As Johann continues eating, Vic stares down at her dessert, cheeks still burning hot with frustrations. Without warning, she stands and grabs her tart plate while Johann is mid-bite.

Before he can respond, she pulls the cabin door open and takes off down the hallway of the next. Expecting Johann to give chase, Vic sprints to the next car door, flinging it open with all her strength. She catches her foot in the transition between cars, sending her stumbling into the next.

Vic grips the handle to the door tightly as she uses it to stabilize herself. The tart, thankfully, remains firmly on its plate. Checking behind her, she doesn't see Johann giving chase and the sense of urgency leaves her.

She walks the remaining distance to Robert's cabin instead. Taking a deep breath, she smooths the front of her blouse with her free hand before knocking.

Robert doesn't answer.

Vic knocks again, harder. Still no answer.

Sighing, she squares her jaw and tries to slide the door open, surprised to find it unlocked. Reclining in one of the seats, papers scattered in the one across, lounges a very perturbed looking Robert. He lowers the letter he had been reading and raises an eyebrow at her.

"It's generally impolite to barge into someone else's space uninvited." His tone is firm, Vic's cheeks reignite in embarrassment.

"I thought you would be hungry," she blurts inelegantly, holding the tart out between them.

"You would be mistaken." Robert returns to the letter.

For a second she's stunned by his tone coupled with her embarrassment. She looks down at the tart as if it holds the clue to why she came here in the first place.

"I've never seen you eat."

He looks back up at her, more confused than annoyed now. "Is that what this is about?"

She moves into the room proper and stands over him, defiant. "Yes. I've never seen you eat."

"I eat plenty, thank you." Robert shifts in his seat, uncomfortable with this turn.

"How can you when you never dine with us?"

"I sit down to dinner with you all regularly. Just the other night the four of us were together."

"There was no plate out for you."

Robert's eyes narrow. "Why does this matter to you?"

"I've never seen you eat, it's unnatural."

The implication of the word hardens his face. He carefully folds and puts down the letter he had been reading. Vic catches a flash of the same pointed handwriting she'd seen on his desk once before.

Slowly and carefully, Robert gets to his feet. He fills the space between her and the window, forcing her to have to step back to make the space more comfortable.

For a moment, he stares at her directly. She tries to fix him with the same look.

Without taking his eyes from hers, he takes the dessert fork from the plate and cuts a bite. As his lips part, Vic's face turns white as she watches the fork --- piece of tart and all --- disappear behind them.

Just to be sure she saw, he holds up the fork for her to examine and begins chewing. Once finished, Robert takes another bite, and then yet another until the entire tart is gone.

"Has that satisfied your curiosity?"

Vic finally takes a step back, turning her gaze away from him. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," he replies curtly. "Please leave."

All too happy to oblige, she quickly retreats out the door and slams it behind her. Her feet lead her the last few steps to her own cabin. As she collapses into her bed, dessert plate abandoned on the floor, she starts to cry.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Barely anything is said between the two men when Johann returns. Johann can already sense any meeting that may have been planned is now canceled.

They sit mostly in silence. Robert, reclined in his seat, continues to read his letters and mumble to himself. Johann tries to read, but continually finds himself distracted with thoughts of home and his wife.

Neither feels compelled to say anything to the other, the silence between them comfortable after years.

It's on his third reading of the same letter that Robert's stomach begins to churn. Absentmindedly, Robert begins to rub it, as if the circular motion would get it to settle. Instead it only groans in response.

He closes his eyes and takes a deep steady breath, already beginning to feel nauseous. A pang of guilt washes over him as it does. Vic's beautiful smiling face turning pale with hurt in his mind.

The next wave forces him to have to sit up properly. Dizziness overwhelms him as he does, forcing him to lean back against the seat. Johann closes his book and glances over at Robert as he senses something off about his friend.

Vic's accusation of being unnatural echoes around in Robert's head as his stomach growls loudly. His eyes fly open in shock. Both men look at each other as a loud belch escapes from Robert, doubling him over with its force.

"Are you alright?" Johann asks, reaching out to place a hand on Robert's knee.

Robert suddenly stands, one hand to his mouth and he rushes off to the cabin lavatory. Johann rushes after, holding the door open as the barely digested tart evacuates Robert's stomach. He burps a few more times, each time bringing up just a bit more tart than the last time.

They pause and wait for another round before daring to speak. Robert sinks to the floor, wedging himself awkwardly between the door and the toilet. One hand holding back his hair, one hand steadyng him as his senses continue to dance.

"Are you alright?" Johann asks again, squatting down to face him.

Robert takes a deep breath. "I don't know."

"You ate the tart, didn't you?"

Robert closes his eyes and groans. A faint smile plays on Johann's lips as he shakes his head. "You know better."

"Hush, I know." Robert moans in agony, another wave of nausea passing over him.

"Sir..." Johann begins before Robert interrupts.

"Don't start with that now."

"Fine, Robert. Is the charade really worth this?"

Robert doesn't get the chance to respond before he begins dry heaving again. The thought of the tart, of Vic's face full of earnestness and then shame, only adds to the pain. Between the two, he briefly wonders which is truly the worst.

Finally, what he hopes is the last bit of tart finds its way out and his stomach settles somewhat. He leans back against the lavatory wall, breathing heavily.

"I didn't...know...what else to do." He admits between breaths.

"Not eat something you know you'll just vomit up."

Just the mention of vomiting brings on yet another wave of nausea coupled with a hollow feeling in Robert's stomach. He feels his stomach contract as if trying to expel more, but his dry heaves produce nothing.

"Why don't you just tell her?"

"Because she doesn't understand yet."

Johann frowns. "You haven't given her the chance yet."

Robert shakes his head. "She'll just run away."

"So you'd rather keep her in the dark and treat her this way?"

"It would be like Claire all over again. Vampyr Madness."

"You don't know that," Johann shakes his head at Robert. "Think about Emily, the Doc, and I; how long are we supposed to hide it from her? She's going to figure it out soon enough and when she does, we're all going to lose her."

Robert says nothing in response. The three of them have avoided discussing the topic since she arrived. Now, after over a month of living together, he understands why she'd revert to tricks to get to know what he's hiding.

"What do you suggest?" He finally asks in defeat.

"Get to know her, tell her things about yourself."

He grunts. "Like what?"

"You know how to do this, I shouldn't have to coach you on how to talk to people."

"Fine, fine." He runs his hand through his hair. "It's just difficult. She acts so much like her."

"I know." Johann replies softly as he gazes down at the floor.

"The excited glow in her face and the way she pushes back on everything."

Johann can't help but chuckle after the evening's events. "They both get ideas and run away with them."

"Claire always wanted to change the way things were. Vic almost seems dead-set on the same."

"She has a way of pushing her luck, if nothing else."

"Even the way her curls bounce as she moves are the same as Claire."

Johann let's things lapse into silence as Robert runs a hand over his chest. A warmth he had forgotten ripples its way through his heart.

"Sometimes I look at Vic and think 'she's back!' She moves through the room and for a moment I think she'll come over to embrace me." His shoulders slump as he tilts his head back. "Those Before, I miss her."

Robert closes his eyes as he spins up old memories of lovers now gone. Watching the way Claire would move through a room, remembering the softness of her skin, and the way her blue eyes would sparkle with ideas.

The image shifts. A noose around a delicate throat. A deep purple and black bruise on alabaster.

He shudders back to reality. Johann places a hand on his arm, "Vic isn't her."

Robert nods his head slowly. "I know."

"What happened to her won't happen to Vic. Try to trust her a little."

Robert nods again. He pulls his knees into his chest and wraps his arms around them, his arms desperate to hold the past close. To make it real again.

"I'll try." He murmurs. "I'll try."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A loud knock at her cabin door startles Vic awake the next morning. She had spent much of the night caught between crying and anger, emotions flaring high until she had exhausted herself and collapsed into sleep. Now, standing before the lavatory mirror as the train begins to pull into station, her tired and puffy eyes seem haunted.

Neither of the two men come to collect her.

Instead, she meets Robert out on the platform. Their three bags fill up the space between the two of them. She looks anywhere but at him.

“Johann went to fetch an auto for us.” His tone is soft and controlled, lulling Vic back into familiarity.

She only nods her head in response, continuing to glance around the station.

Another train pulls in behind them, its steam cloaking them from everyone else for a brief second. Vic takes the chance to observe Robert in secret. Though he is dressed well, his hair is disheveled and his overall manner seems less confident to her than normal. A small part of her is both pleased and sorry to see him in such a state.

“Vic,” Robert pauses as a group of commuters disembark and push past them.
“About last night...”

A fresh spark of hurt catches in Vic’s chest as her expression hardens. Before Robert can speak another word, Johann rejoins them from the dissipating steam.

“Come on, you two, the auto is waiting.” He grabs all three bags as if they were stuffed toys and begins wandering ahead.

The three of them pile into the auto awkwardly. Between themselves and their bags, there is very little room for comfortable sitting, doubly so with Johann’s large frame taking up a majority of the space. Vic finds herself caught between the door and Robert; a disagreeable situation.

As they rumble down the streets of Richeland, Vic stares out the window, determined to ignore both her discomfort and her employer.

The buildings here are far taller than any she has ever seen before. They cast long shadows across the street as the sun rises behind them. She stares up them as they go along, finding herself easily hypnotized by how they seem to stretch into the air to touch the clouds.

It doesn't take them long to leave the tall center of town behind. Row homes and shorter buildings make up the majority of structures; a more familiar sight. After a few more blocks, the auto stops in front of a three story home with a hand-carved sign swinging from its porch.

Johann again takes the lead, once again grabbing their bags and heading up the steps towards the door. Robert swiftly follows, walking in his usual heavy marching step. It's only Vic who pauses at the entrance to stare.

The front yard is well-maintained with various flowers and herbs filling the space. A small wrought iron bench is placed perfectly under an old-growth tree Vic can't begin to identify, its leaves already turning a rich red color for the autumn. She takes her time walking to the front of the house, letting her fingers dance across the tops of the low bushes planted along the path.

As she approaches, she notices Robert watching her from under the porch sign. Finally able to read what is carved there, it declares in blue-painted block script that this is the *River House Hostel*. He smiles down at her as she ascends the white porch steps.

"This is my favorite hostel in Richeland." Once again, his voice is smooth and it soothes her into forgetting any hurt.

"It's absolutely enchanting."

"I wanted us to stay here for your first visit in town."

Vic blushes and bows her head, looking down at her feet, unsure what to say.

"Let's get checked in, shall we? Then you can rest and get away from me."

She almost protests his statement until she remembers the embarrassment on the train ride over. Instead, she climbs the last step and follows Robert inside to where Johann is already wrapping up the checking in process.

"Here, keys." Johann passes the two of them small metal keys with wooden tags. "Vic, you have the special privilege of staying on the third floor with a suite all to yourself."

Surprised, Vic looks over at Johann. "There's a mistake."

"No mistake." Robert chimes in. "We've stayed here plenty of times before, we wanted your trip here to be memorable."

"Go on up. Once I get this suave troublemaker and myself settled, I'll bring your bag up to you."

"That's alright!" Vic grabs her bag off the floor, guilt and fear over the bottles of blood suddenly consuming her thoughts. "I can handle it myself."

"I'll grab you before we head out to the auction house this evening." Robert calls after her as she heads towards the staircase. "Try to rest and enjoy yourself!"

Vic says nothing in reply as she quickly ascends the stairs. She doesn't stop to take in the second floor, instead she hurries along to the end of the hall and rushes up the stairs to a small platform just before her room. A sign on the door identifies it as *The River Room* with a small fish that matches the one found on her key.

She hastily unlocks the room and shuts the door behind her. Alone, the swirl of her confused emotions burn in her chest.

A large set of windows set behind an iron four-post canopy bed floods the room with sunlight glittering off the river below. The view transfixes her and she abandons her bag by the door to wander over and look out. Though the river is wide, Vic can just make out the tops of houses lining the opposite bank.

To the east, from where they came, is a path that runs behind the rest of the houses towards the center of town. In the opposite direction it meanders into a wooded area that she can only assume ends at some sort of park.

Exhausted, but still enchanted, Vic collapses onto the soft white cotton duvet of her bed. Though she tries to fight off the encroaching darkness of deep sleep she loses easily as her eyes close. The comfort of the bed winning out against the torrent of feelings she'd rather ignore.

As she slips into a half-sleep state, a blast of a horn from a passing river boat startles her awake. Heart racing, Vic sits up and gazes out the window to watch the slow moving paddle steamer cruise off to the west.

She lets out a deep sigh. Though the comfort of the bed still calls to her, the rude awakening reminds her that the day has only just begun. It can only get noisier from here.

Directly across from her is the door to the en-suite bathroom. She gently opens it and is stunned to see it's rich interior.

Though it takes up surprisingly little of the bedroom, it feels far more spacious than it appears. Just as with the rest of the house, it too is painted in blue and white, with thick stripes of alternating color lining the two longer walls. An ivory vanity is built into the wall of the separated water closet; river rocks line the oval mirror while the vines of two hanging pothos plants cascade down each side.

It's the large claw-foot tub at the other end of the room that makes her squeal with glee and immediately she begins to fill it.

Vic hastily begins undressing, flinging her travel clothes to the floor with abandon. Free of them, she opens one of the frosted windows behind the tub just enough for her to peer out of while soaking.

She gets in the tub well before it's finished filling. The hot water instantly dampening her rekindled hurts. Grabbing the nearby rose-scented soap bar, she starts the process of clearing her face of any lingering tears.

Just closing her eyes reminds her of her embarrassment. The mortification of watching each bite disappear until the tart itself had disappeared. She wipes the thoughts away with a soft washcloth.

Still, she thinks to herself as she shuts the water off, there is clearly something more going on than anyone wants to admit.

Leaning back into the water, she begins trying to piece together the things she does know. The collection, the bottles, the myths, and the secrecy -- they all lead her back to the conclusion that Robert is a vampyr. Something to be feared and to be stayed away from.

Yet he's never once tried to hurt her. She's never woken with any strange marks on her neck or felt as if he had some strange control over her. Never felt threatened either, only in trouble for failing his expectations.

Vic sinks down further, letting the water reach to just under her chin, shame settling into her chest. In fact, she thinks, Robert had only ever been upset when she deliberately provoked him. A natural response that she should have better respected.

She takes a deep breath and slips beneath the water, staying there until she's out of air.

Vic lays about through the rest of the day, drifting between brief moments of sleep and wakefulness. Though she had brought the book of myths with her to continue reading, she finds she no longer has the interest. Instead her thoughts drift around and around the idea that perhaps she had been too quick to judge Robert.

Drifting off again in the early evening, she finally hears a soft knocking at her door. She smiles to herself.

"Oh good, you're awake." Robert sighs as she opens the door. "Though I hope you got a chance to rest?"

"Between river boat horns, yes."

He smiles at her and his shoulder relax. "Fantastic. Shall we?"

Vic follows after him, only stopping to lock her door before heading downstairs. Johann waits for them eagerly on the first floor. They are barely down the stairs before he takes off ahead of them.

They stick to the shadier side of the street, heading towards the bustling town center. On the way they pass small shops of all varieties and cafes humming with people chatting. Despite the lateness of the day it feels to Vic as if the town is just waking from a nap too.

They turn off the main roads and head down a narrower street full of antique shops. Vic finds her gaze hungrily taking in all the store fronts they pass, having never seen so many all in one concentrated space.

Eventually they come to a stop before a nondescript brick building. Heavy dusty looking curtains are pulled across the large front window that declares it to be an auction house in gold paint. Robert quickly leads them inside.

Inside isn't much better than the outside. Without the natural light, the electric casts a dinginess over the space. An old musty smell seems to emanate from the rugs laid out across as much of the floor as possible.

A short man with greasy hair approaches Robert. "Ah, yes, Robert. Glad you could make it."

His voice sounds as if he can't quite clear his nose. A fact which becomes reality as he pulls a handkerchief from his pocket and blows into it quite loudly. Neither Johann nor Robert seem fazed while Vic tries not to look disgusted.

"Archer, wonderful to see you again!" Robert replies, following Archer over to a free desk stacked with account books and other documents. "How have you been?"

"Oh, as well as can be." They take their seats and Archer's demeanor changes. "Let's get right to business, Robert. Elbert's collection has had quite a lot of interest."

"That's surprising, hadn't he become a hermit before he died?"

Archer peers over his small round reading glasses. "I take it you weren't at the funeral then?"

"Couldn't have made it even if I had wanted to."

"Practically no one showed. No family, hardly any friends."

"That's a pity. He was eccentric, yes, but always kind."

"He wasn't well liked by the end, his paranoia had gotten worse with age. Drove plenty of people away."

"That's unfortunate," Robert frowns. "But about the collection?"

"Right," Archer blows his nose again before thumbing through the large book in front of him. "Now, I did my best to hold on to the things you were looking for. I'm afraid that the art pieces you requested were quickly sold."

As Archer says this, something shifts in the air. A pause in the conversation that lasts just a second too long.

Vic barely notices at first. Her shoulders drop and her heart rate slows. A beautiful halo of light seems to emanate from within Robert as she turns to look at him, its rays reaching out in every direction.

The desire to give Robert whatever he wants fills her thoughts. If only he would tell her what to do. If only he was looking at her.

His voice is honeyed and rich as he asks, "Who was the buyer?"

It's difficult for Vic to take her eyes off of him. Every feature is softened and the dinginess of the light only adds depth to his face. She has the insatiable need to just reach out and touch him.

"I don't know." She faintly hears Archer reply, his voice sounding more distant than a moment before.

Robert smiles with the grace of a benevolent deity. Vic feels as if her heart might break from its beauty. "There isn't a buyer listed in your sale records?"

"It was a private sale," his voice quivers, seconds away from openly sobbing. "I'm so so sorry."

The light dims suddenly. Vic blinks her eyes a few times, unsure if the lights had been as brilliant as she thought they were. Archer blinks and shakes his head, taking a second to blow his nose again, finding it suddenly stuffy.

"Quite alright, you know I understand buyer confidentiality." Robert reassures him, his voice still soft but no longer as rich.

Vic turns her face away from Robert and stares down at the dingy red rug underneath her feet. She can feel her heart suddenly beating rapidly with nervous excitement, her stomach knotted with anticipation. Closing her eyes, she takes a deep breath.

If something strange had truly happened, no one gives any indication that anything untoward happened. She shifts uncomfortably in her seat.

While the two continue working out any details, Vic tries to settle herself. The desire to go out of her way for Robert unsettles her as she recalls how rapidly it had appeared. It reignites the thought that she ought not trust him too much just yet.

Lost in her feelings and the sensations slowly quieting, she doesn't hear as the deal is settled. Robert puts a hand on her shoulder, startling her once again. He frowns at her.

"Are you feeling alright?" He asks her when she looks up at him with wide eyes. "Perhaps you'd like to wait outside while Johann and I look things over?"

Vic only nods before heading back out towards the lobby and slipping through the front door. She leans against the front of the building as a cool breeze sweeps down the street. It brushes a curl against her cheek and she can't help but begin to twirl it as her obsessive thoughts begin anew.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The trio exchange pleasant wishes with Archer as he sees them off. Unrestrained by a mission, Vic takes the lead and meanders at different shops, just in view of the two men.

"What happened in there?" Johann whispers to Robert, slowing his stride to keep pace with him.

"I'm not sure." Robert frowns as he watches Vic flit from shop window to shop window.

"You noticed it too?"

"We were lucky it was only us. That's never happened before."

"What does it mean?"

Robert shrugs and runs a hand through his beard. He intentionally slows Johann to a stop, holding him back to regard their companion as she stares at an antique rocking chair. The wonder on her face as she takes in the beauty of every small detail softens his thoughts from surprise to curiosity.

"Maybe it's her." He finally offers for consideration as Vic wanders down to the end of the street.

"How could that be?"

Once again Robert shrugs. "I don't know. But you felt it too?"

"It was strange. It seemed like you were made of this beautiful light. I wanted to touch it, hold it. Hold you and protect you, give you anything you wanted."

"It's never worked on you before. It's also never worked that well on anyone. Archer was about to cry over the sale." Robert strokes his goatee, mulling over the details.

"Suspicious."

"Yes," he agrees as they catch up to Vic. "It is indeed."

As they approach, Vic pulls her attention away from a stained glass lamp carefully hung in an antique lamp shop window. "What took you two so long?"

"Just going over some details." Johann quickly covers.

"Besides, it's a pleasure to watch you shop." Robert adds.

Vic turns pink, looking back at the lamp that held her attention. "I've never seen so many antique shops in one place before."

"Welcome to Richeland, young lady." He laughs, casting a quick glance over to Johann. "The evening is still fresh. Care to take in more of the city's wonders with me?"

Vic slowly turns to look at him. "I...," she hesitates a moment, wary. "Alright."

Robert extends his arm to her which she takes gingerly, hovering more than holding on to him. He smiles down at her, attempting to be reassuring as he shifts her hand somewhat to be a bit more secure.

"I'll see you back at the house." Johann laughs, patting Robert on the shoulder before heading back the way they had come.

"What would you like to explore first?" Robert gestures with his free hand to the street before them. "Anything you can possibly think of is happening here. Name it and we're off."

"The river." The response is automatic and catches Robert by some surprise in how simple it is.

"The Mautuk Valley River, an interesting choice. There's a path that follows along it if that's of interest..."

Before Vic can say anything further, her stomach gives a low growl. The sound, though faint over the traffic and crowd noises, causes him to involuntarily wince.

"It sounds like you have other, more pressing, needs however."

"I suppose I am hungry. I didn't think to eat before we left." Vic admits.

"Then let's start there and we'll explore the river afterwards."

A few steps away is a sign that designates it as a ride hailing stop. Robert waves over to a nearby auto driver and they pull up a few feet to where they are. Bold yellow painted text on its side declares it is FOR HIRE.

Opening the rear door, he hands Vic into the vehicle, helping her arrange her skirt in the back before climbing in beside her.

"The Last Cafe, please." He instructs the driver, who pulls away from the curb with haste.

Immediately he knows he's lost her attention as she turns to watch the world passing by them. Robert doesn't think of interrupting, instead taking turns watching the street from her window and sneaking the odd glance at Vic.

They pass a small theatre just setting up for the night, the box office displaying a poster for *Hektor the Magician*. Electric streetlights pop into life as they continue down the street. Dinner crowds begin their nightly search for a place to eat.

The town shaking off the day and readying itself for a lively evening.

Eventually they come to a Y-shaped fork in the road. The auto pulls off down the right fork, stopping just behind another For Hire auto letting out a small group of women who appear in good spirits.

Robert quickly hands over a few notes to the driver. After he exits the auto, he turns to offer his hand to Vic. As she steps out, her skirt gets caught under her foot and it sends her stumbling into Robert's arms.

He holds on to her for a moment, his own dark complexion coloring as he habitually pulls her to him. The sounds of giggles from the trio of women ahead of him only adds to his embarrassment.

"You can let go now." Vic's soft voice brings him back to the present moment and he releases her.

Without acknowledging what happened, Robert closes the auto door and sends it on its way. He lightly touches Vic's shoulder, gesturing across the street at a building behind her, "Will this do for dinner?"

There, placed directly in the center of the split, is a two-story restaurant with patio seating granting a view of the whole street. Gorgeous curling wrought iron fencing lines the front and balcony areas. Short hedgerows and creeping ivy offer some privacy from the street. Up above the front in delicate curving script is a stained glass sign that reads *The Last Cafe*.

Vic's eyes never seem to stop roaming the entirety of the front facade as Robert leads her across the street. Her continued awe at everything makes him wish he had extended their trip some. If only to show her even more wonders.

Robert has the host seat them outside. They're led to small table that faces towards the street they had just been on. Immediately Vic begins watching the wandering crowds as they flit between boutique shops open late.

For a moment, while he watches her, he finds her morphing more and more with his memories. The way some of her stray curls at the nape of her neck twist. Her awe that sends sparks of light into her eyes.

He rubs a hand across his chest, keeping them close.

He closes his eyes, separating reality from memory. Blonde curls dance before him, a pair of blue eyes gazing softly from under them. His hand stops over his heart.

There, in that moment, Robert takes two deep breaths as he tries to capture the memory of a feeling. His heart softens into that long-gone familiar warmth.

Shaking the image off, he clears his throat and opens his eyes. Vic turns to look at him in surprise, having been engrossed in her people watching. Their eyes meet. He gives her a wide smile that doesn't quite seem to reach his eyes.

They hold each other's gaze, time seeming to stop as Vic gets lost in his smile. Any tension in her body appears to melt away. He tries not to get distracted by the way her cheeks flush.

A breath he was holding slowly escapes Robert's chest, his hand falling away from his heart. His shoulders relax as he leans back into his chair. As he does, he imagines the feeling of warmth he had conjured up spreading across the table from him and into her.

Vic nearly jumps from her seat when he softly says, "That's a very lovely outfit. Did Emily find it for you?"

She runs her hands over the simple navy colored skirt, blushing profusely. "T-Thank you, yes."

He tries not to smirk at how easy it is to catch her off-guard with politeness. "It suits you well."

They lapse back into silence for a moment, Vic burying her face in her menu. Every now and then she glances up at Robert, blushes, and returns to her passive searching.

From his vantage, Robert casts his gaze around the nearly empty patio. Several pairs of eyes are turned their direction in curiosity, though most are trying to avoid any obvious staring.

It causes Robert to frown.

He watches the waitress approach one of the patrons on the opposite end of the patio. The waitress turns towards their table as the patron vaguely gestures in their direction. Even from his distance the surprised flush that comes to the waitress's face can clearly be seen. She rushes off to the bar without another word to the patron, who is now stuck staring at them.

Robert clears his throat, recapturing Vic's attention. "Please, order anything you like. My treat."

Vic doesn't question him at all. She goes back to her half-hearted looking.

As he is intently watching her, the waitress approaches their table with a glass of wine neither had ordered. She sets it down gently, winks at Robert, before taking

off. The frown on his face deepens as he catches the patron down the way still staring and turning red.

The waitress returns a moment later, this time standing so close to him and trying her best to pose in a way that any man would find attractive. She leans over the table to fill their glasses, her breasts dangerously close to brushing Robert's arm. He instinctively shifts away from her, careful to avoid accidentally touching her in any way.

"It isn't every day we see someone as handsome as you come in," she boldly starts off before remembering her job. "Welcome to the Last Cafe, sir. Feel free to order anything you like. And I do mean anything."

As she says this, she winks at Robert once again before wandering off again. Vic, on the other hand, appears oblivious to her advances --- choosing to continue staring at Robert with the flush on her face. Robert closes his eyes having seen enough of this bizarre display.

He takes a deep breath, letting the feeling of warmth in his chest dissipate. Feeling as if it runs off him like being bathed in a river.

When he reopens his eyes, the waitress has moved off, a hand to her chest as she meanders around the patio space wiping down tables absentmindedly. The patron who had sent him a drink shakes their head before going back to their meal. Vic, the only one he truly meant to charm, blinks her eyes and looks around --- the flush on her face gone.

He sighs and runs a hand through his hair, not even one step closer to understanding what happened.

"I'm sorry," Vic murmurs, "what were we talking about?"

Robert sighs again, thoughts still tangled up. "I was saying, please feel free to order whatever you want."

She returns her attention to the menu and keeps blinking her eyes. "Thank you. I feel," she trails off and looks out over at the street. "Weren't the lights less harsh?"

He tilts his head. "No, I don't think so."

"Odd," and again she lapses into silence for a moment before murmuring, "It was like that in the auction house too. The lights were different."

Under the table, Robert begins to fiddle with his napkin. "Have you been sleeping enough? Perhaps you're just tired?"

"Perhaps." Vic's eyebrows draw in to consider his point, but the frown on her face belies what she thinks. He tries to focus on the feeling of the fabric in his hand.

"I'm sure it's nothing a good night's rest after a meal won't fix. If it's still happening when we return, we can have Tobey look at you."

This idea seems displeasing to Vic as her face blanches. "No, thank you. It's probably nothing, like you said."

The waitress returns, apologizing profusely for having not taken their order earlier and excusing herself for the delay. While Vic orders for herself, Robert watches how her face holds on to doubt through the downturn of her eyebrows. He orders the soup of the day, if only to avoid her further suspicion.

As the waitress walks off, Robert catches Vic looking at him and for a second they smile at each other like children. Robert breaks eye contact first, looking down at his napkin, trying to compose himself again. He squeezes it softly as if holding her hand.

A gentle breeze rustles the leaves of the ivy around them, pulling Vic's attention back to the street and its crowds. Though not a very popular section of town, plenty of autos come and go down the street, stopping only occasionally to let out patrons.

Robert lets the silence between them settle as he returns to the oddity of the day. Several hypotheses entertain his thoughts but only a few seem truly plausible. Try as he might to come up with other explanations, the only variable that has been different is her presence.

He scrutinizes Vic for a moment longer. Too many questions float around in his head with no answers forthcoming. He realizes that he has no idea who she is, or her past, and Johann's advice echoes around the edges of his thinking.

As the waitress returns with their respective meals, he finally breaks the silence. "How are you liking Richeland so far?"

"It's impressive. I've never been to somewhere so grand before." Vic pushes around a few pieces of her pasta before taking a bite.

"Have you lived in Westford your whole life then?"

She shakes her head while finishing her bite. "No. I've only been there a few years. I grew up in a much smaller town."

Robert lets her return to eating her pasta and taking glances at the street without interruption. He picks up his spoon and stirs his soup, watching her to see if she notices or cares.

"It's overwhelming sometimes." He muses aloud. "We've - Johann and I, that is - have lived in some larger towns but Richeland never fails to impress."

"How long have you known each other?"

"So long now that I've lost track. We've been through a lot together and sometimes that makes our time together feel much longer than it's likely been."

"Emily mentioned that you had moved around some."

"Ah, yes." He once again swirls his soup around. "I'm sure she told you that we had considered settling where we met her?"

"She said that you had, but that Johann was so concerned for her health that you moved to Westford to be near Tobey."

"Indeed."

"How do you know him?"

Though her tone remains curious rather than accusatory, Robert still finds himself becoming uncomfortable with her questions. "Another old friend that I've lost track of how long I've known him. I knew him in another life, so to speak."

This answer causes Vic to frown as if unhappy that he seems to not want to provide more context. She doesn't push the issue, instead choosing to go back to her food and people watching.

Robert stops fiddling with his spoon, letting it rest against the bowl. He follows her gaze towards the street and sighs.

"I meant to thank you."

She turns to look at him. "What for?"

"For the maps. I was harsh, stewing in my own disappointment, and for that I'm sorry. You didn't deserve my irritation."

"I think..." Vic pauses for a second, reconsidering her next statement. "You're welcome."

"You handled things well. I'm only sorry that I had not handled my end of things half as well." Robert turns to look at her with a look of tender thanks.

Vic flushes lightly, eventually turning back to her meal and picking at the food on her plate. Once again he finds his hand at his chest, thumb gently rubbing the space above his heart.

They do not speak for the rest of the meal. Vic, distracted by the couples walking by, doesn't seem to notice that Robert never eats. As they finish and pay the bill, he makes sure to leave extra for the wasted food.

He leads the way across the street and down towards a small alleyway that terminates into a dirt path. It opens up onto a section of the river path that grants them a spectacular view of the shimmering water.

Robert smiles to himself as he hears Vic softly gasp as they come upon it. "There's an even better viewing spot just down the way."

Without protest, she follows him, her eyes darting between the path and the river.

"I've been meaning to ask," he says as they begin to walk, "about your interest in the North."

Vic casts a quick glance in his direction. "What do you want to know?"

"What fascinates you so much?"

"My father used to tell me stories about things up there."

"The usual tales to keep children in line?" He laughs, hoping to put her at ease.

Vic chuckles softly and tucks a curl behind her ear. "The Ice Fisher still haunts me in nightmares sometimes."

"Ghastly." Robert shivers. "You never truly forget the frozen bodies of the children he takes." Vic pauses in her tracks for a second and gives Robert a puzzled look.

She eyes him for a second longer before resuming their walk. "When the lakes in our town would freeze over, he would tell all the children to not go out on the lake after dark because The Ice Fisher would get them." She looks down at her feet, shoulders slumping forward slightly. "No one believed him until Charlie Miller fell in and drowned."

He nods sympathetically. "I'm truly sorry you had to experience that."

"He was an idiot. We all knew it."

"They always are when he comes calling. Forgetting to test the ice, ignoring cracks, sneaking out."

"He did it on a dare." She rolls her eyes and sighs. "Group of boys had gone out late, dared each other to go out on the ice as far as they could. Charlie fell in and they ran."

Robert grimaces. "Cowards."

"His brother told his parents in the morning. Despite being an idiot, he had always been their favorite." She pauses for a moment, pace slowing. "My dad helped pull the body from the lake."

"Your father sounds like a strong man."

She smiles slightly. "He always said he did what was necessary."

"How did he learn about all these stories? They're not wildly known this far south, usually."

She stops again and peers off in the direction of the river. He doesn't try to press the issue, watching her intently.

"He grew up there."

Not knowing what else to say, Robert simply mutters, "I see."

Vic shakes her head and begins walking again, Robert only a step behind her.

"What did your mother think of all the stories? Especially after that?"

"Couldn't say." Her voice crackles with defensiveness. "I never knew her."

"Ah," Robert feels his cheeks flush briefly. "I apologize."

She takes a deep breath, fingers fiddling with the outline of something under her blouse. "It's alright. You couldn't have known."

As they continue down the path, Vic spots a break in the trees that appears to lead down closer to the river. Robert follows after her as she gingerly makes her way to the river bank.

Staring at the water, she adds, "No one else knows about that or about Charlie."

He comes up behind her and tenderly places a hand on her shoulder, unsure how else to offer her comfort. "Thank you for trusting me."

Her shoulders slump forward again. "It was terrifying to think that my father's stories could be real. I was ten, Charlie was fifteen."

"The Ice Fisher is just a legend. We tell it to the grieving to ease their disbelief."

"You lived up North?" Vic turns towards him, the spark of curiosity back in her voice.

He sighs and runs a hand through his hair. "Grew up in a small town called Na'nalak, right near the border of the storm."

She looks him over quickly, eyebrows knit together in doubt. Robert removes the hand from her shoulder and looks back out over the river.

"It was a colony town," he explains. "My father thought he could start a farm up there."

Vic lightly scoffs. "He didn't really think it would work, did he?"

"The soil up there is incredibly rich. He just failed to account for how short the growing season is."

"He was successful then?"

"As I said, he failed to take into account how short the season is. Did he grow things? Absolutely. Was it a success? It depends on what you consider success."

"It must've been, if you can afford the life you have now."

Robert shakes his head, kicking a loose rock into the water. "Victoria," he turns to look at her, "I work hard to maintain the life we all live. I hope this trip has helped clarify that for you."

A deep flush comes to her face and she turns to look at the water as well. "Yes, of course, Robert."

For a moment they gaze out at the water, listening to the distant sounds of evening revelers out on the main street. Eventually Robert sighs and turns to Vic. "We struggled to get by. When I first began traveling with Johann, we had next to nothing between us. It was only through luck that we're able to live as comfortably as we do now."

"I didn't know." Her voice is as soft as the water lapping the shore.

He once again puts a hand on her shoulder. "It's alright. I, just like you, haven't told many people about that time in our lives. We live happily for now. It's all we can do."

Vic looks up at him and Robert smiles down at her as their eyes meet. "Thank you for trusting me," she repeats awkwardly.

"You're welcome, dear. Let's get back to our lodging, shall we?" He gestures back up the hidden path they had come down, letting her lead the way.

They walk on for a bit in silence. Robert's hand brushes near Vic's every now and again. Each time it does, the urge to take it in his comes over him and he tries his best to ignore the impulse.

Before they can say anything further, the trees around the path slowly thin and the amount of streetlights begins to increase. All too soon they reach the back gate of the hostel. Robert holds open the ornate wrought iron and wooden door for her.

She steps through, yawns, and turns to look back at him. "Aren't you coming in?"

Robert slowly closes the gate behind her, leaning himself over the curved metal. "No, I'm feeling like a longer stroll is in order for me."

"Oh," she says dejectedly, looking to the ground for a moment before looking back at him. "I...had a lovely time."

A stray curl gets blown in front of Vic's face by an errant breeze. He begins to reach out to move it, but stops himself as she brushes it aside. Instead, Robert grips the top of the gate, running his thumb along the inside of the curve as he smiles at her.

"I'm glad to hear that you enjoyed yourself." Vic yawns again and he can't help himself but be charmed by it. "Get some sleep, you and Johann will be headed out early tomorrow."

She nods in response. "Good night, Robert."

"Good night, Victoria."

Vic walks up the path to the back porch and disappears inside. Robert lets go of the metal and sighs, turning back to the path. He moves to a position just out of the direct light of a nearby streetlight and watches as the light in her room comes on.

As her silhouette appears near the window, Robert lightly touches his fingers to his lips and sends a kiss into the gentle breeze.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

With the others out of the house, Emily delights in finally having time to herself. She spends her morning quietly having her tea at the window, watching birds come and go from the feeder hanging in the tree out front. The silence of the house lulling her into a moment of relaxation.

By the afternoon, with one blouse alteration finished, she finds herself getting restless and in need of some company.

The day is relatively warm with a fresh autumnal breeze that stirs the air now and then. It feels like one last gift from the sun before the equinox and winter steal it away.

Mable's Tailoring and Notions isn't a long walk from the house, only a few blocks to the outskirts of town. Emily starts her walk with determination, feeling confident that her health will hold for such a simple walk. By the time she reaches the shop, however, Emily is out of breath and needs to steady herself against the doorframe for a moment.

As she takes another shaky breath, the door inches open and a familiar face peers out at her.

"Emily Brice," states a deep feminine voice from behind the door. "Come inside and have some tea."

Without protest, Emily slowly walks into the shop and allows herself to be led to a table just by the display window. She takes the plush seat offered to her, trying to not collapse into it out of politeness. Her eyes close as the shop's proprietor wanders off to fetch the whistling kettle from a back room.

She places a hand over her heart and focuses her attention on how it thumps against her ribs. With each breath she tries to inhale slower and slower, not being swayed by the rhythm of her heart to gasp for air. Each breath slows her heartbeat down until it no longer feels as if it were trying to break free.

The shop owner returns, carrying an elaborate blue and white porcelain tea set on a silver tea tray. As she sets it down on the table, Emily can finally see the sweet windmills and fields of flowers decorating the tea pot. She smiles to herself upon discovering each cup features a sunflower delicately painted at the bottom.

"This is a beautiful set, Mable," Emily comments, gently setting the tea cups down. "Where did you find this?"

Mable flips the sign at the front of her shop to read 'Closed' and locks the door behind her. "It's from me hometown. A reminder of where I come from."

"West Isles, correct?"

"Ya."

Emily smiles while Mable pours their tea, "My parents had considered moving us there at one time. Selling vacation homes."

"Feckling tourists." She mutters as she puts the tea pot down a bit harder than intended.

Emily nods in sympathy. "It was the only time I was glad my health prevented them from doing what they wanted."

"Always 'mine this' and 'mine that', never mindin' they business!" Mable shakes her head with a huff. "They been thinkin' da beach belong to them now, blockin' off sections. Me ma been sayin' they ruinin' da waters, takin' all da fish and pearls, leavin' nothin' behind."

Mable flops into a matching high-backed chair, her large frame taking up much of the space. She adjusts the black and gold colored scarf tied over her coarse hair.

"It changed, Em. Used ta be da islands be covered in flowers. Now they jus' covered in houses."

"It's a shame."

Mable huffs again, looking out the window. "They all sit empty half da year! Yet we forced ta leave! Waters take me under, wish da rich had never come. Instead of protectin' da culture, they ruin da islands."

Unsure what else to say, Emily frowns down at her tea cup. Though she had always hated the affluence she had been born into, been exhausted by its demands and airs, she was still protective over it. Still, she knows Mable is right; the rich had been nothing but a blight on the isles.

Sheepishly, Emily asks, "On a sensitive note, about pearls. Any luck on sourcing a few?"

Mable sits back and sips her tea as she nods. "Ya," she sets her cup now, "lemme get them."

She gets up slowly and rubs at her back as she makes her way over to the front counter. Despite still being relatively young, the long nights of sitting doing detailed embroidery hadn't been kind on Mable's back. She grabs a small velvet covered box from the counter and sets it in front of Emily.

"Me brother been keeping a small farm. He figured out ways ta keep them clams happy, they keep makin him pearls."

Inside are a collection of multicolored pearls in different sizes --- silver, cream, and blue --- all perfectly round. Emily studies several of them, fascinated with their sheen in the afternoon light.

She takes a sip of her tea and leans back in her chair. "They're beautiful, truly. I assume they're going quickly?"

Mable shakes her head as she sits back down. "Not yet. Yer da first. Though I suspec' they be goin' fast soon."

"Oh?" Emily glances over at Mable. "What makes you say that?"

Though they're the only two people in the whole shop, Mable looks around quickly before leaning in conspiratorially. She leans one elbow on the table, nearly knocking into her tea saucer, and clears her throat.

"Well," she begins, Emily leans onto the table as well, "word on da street is dat ol' Manchester place been sold finally."

An image of the house comes to Emily's mind, it's large stone facade that towers over the rest of the street. For as long as she's lived in the neighborhood it's been locked up tight. It was apparent though, that even having been left to stand unoccupied at the end of town for so long, someone was still keeping the grounds in hope of it being sold one day.

"That's fantastic!" She exclaims brightly. "I know very little of the former owners, it's about time someone took care of it."

"Ya." Mable's sly smile spreads across her face. "I hear his lordship is very ambitious and very eligible."

Emily mock gasps and play slaps at Mable's hand. "What are you suggesting? You know I'd never leave Johann for anything."

"No fer you, doll," Mable laughs. "Rumor has it yer hidin' yerselves a girlie away."

Emily flushes with embarrassment and leans back in her chair, "We've not been hiding her away as such..."

"Don't be lyin' ta me now." Mable admonishes before sipping at her tea.

"Oh, it's not like that," Emily tries to dismiss. "Though I'll admit we've been keeping her busy."

"Is dat why you no bring her ta me?"

"Yes! We hired her to do a job, she's been busy fulfilling that role. Honest. Not much more to it." Emily sips her tea, eyeing Mable to watch her reaction.

Mable frowns a little. "And she live there?"

"Well, yes."

"Mmmhmmm," Mable hums. "And how long 'til she marries da master?"

Emily chokes on her tea a little at Mable's bluntness. Clearing her throat, she stutters out, "Vic isn't like that!"

Mable laughs and shakes her head. "She may no be, but he is."

"Who? Robert?"

"Ya. Rich, lonely, eligible, and charmin' Robert."

"Oh, please," Emily dismisses. "He's been far too busy with work to notice much of anything, let alone her. Besides, lately she's been spending most of her time studying under Johann."

Mable shrugs. "Ya say dat now. Jus' you watch, dis young rich lord come to town an suddenly he be interested."

"I don't know, it's been a long time since Robert has been out with anyone. We rarely get invited to any of the social events anymore." She admits with a hint of sadness in her voice.

Mable puts down her tea cup and quickly sorts through the box of pearls. She sets down a handful of perfectly round, creamy white pearls in front of Emily before closing the box. Emily takes a look at the pearls, back at Mable, and then back down at the pearls.

"Here's what I do," Mable declares, getting back up to put the box back on the counter. "These pearls are yers. When ya get da invite ta the party of da year, ya tell me what ya want done to 'em."

"Mable, that's too generous, we probably wont be..." Emily starts to protest.

"Ah ah," she interrupts. "Ya will be, so ya come see me when ya do. I got a feelin'."

Knowing better than to argue with Mable and her feelings, Emily smiles and nods her head. "Alright, I will."

"Good. Don' worry 'bout da price, I got work for ya in exchange."

"You always do," Emily laughs, getting up to follow Mable into another room.

Strewn about a table in the back room are several evening gowns that Emily can only assume need some sort of alteration work. The two discuss the needs of each

dress, Emily carefully writing notes on a scrap paper nearby. Most are simple changes to hemlines and updates to keep with current fashions, things that are tedious but easy enough to get done in a few afternoons.

Mable packs the dresses and notes for each into boxes while Emily goes to finish her tea. They chat a bit longer about the recent fashion magazines and the Duchess of Albright's most recent scandal. Just as Mable begins to describe the Duke's very public rebuke of his wife, a delicate chiming begins from the back room, alerting them both to the passing of time.

"Ah," Mable says sadly. "Da time has flown."

As she unlocks the door and flips the shop's sign back, Emily reloads the tray with their empty tea cups. "It's always a pleasure, Mable. I'll have Johann come by to pick up the dresses that need altering when he arrives home tomorrow."

The two embrace for a moment, both taking comfort in the closeness of the other. "Don't worry. I know I be seein' ya again soon."

"I surely hope so," Emily rubs her friend's back lightly before pulling away. "Suppose I'll take a walk by the old Manchester place before heading home though."

Mable laughs and opens the front door. "See that ya do. An' remember, only a matter of time."

Emily shakes her head as she heads out, smile wide across her face. "We'll see, Mable. You'll be the first to know if it does."

"Oh, I know." Mable winks at her. "Now, you take care!"

Emily heads off in the direction of the edge of town, towards Manchester Manor. As she starts off, Emily reminds herself that it's five large blocks to the edge of town; a perfectly reasonable distance. Though her heart begins to protest against the additional unexpected exertion, she presses on in spite.

A little unsteady on her feet, she stops along the way to rest and catch her breath. By the final block her impatience with her condition propels her forward, trying to prove to herself that she isn't as weak as her heart wants her to believe.

Thankfully she comes upon the manor house quickly enough and finds a large old oak to rest herself against.

She tries not to sink down to sit in the shade when she finds her breath is difficult to catch. Instead she doubles over for a moment, breathing hard and coughing intermittently. With a hand to her heart, Emily starts feeling light headed as she slowly sinks to the ground.

The neighborhood is quiet, not a single person passing by. For a brief moment she wonders to herself if she's going to pass out before her breathing finally begins to normalize.

Deciding to finally heed her body's warning, Emily rearranges her skirts to be a bit more comfortable on the ground. A breeze picks up, whipping a few loose strands of hair about her face. She breathes as deeply as possible without setting off another coughing fit, relishing the feeling of the air in her lungs and on her face.

From her vantage point she notices movement through the Manchester grounds. Gardeners work through some overgrown ivy and hedgerows, paying her no attention as they trim back branches peaking through the wrought iron front gate that surrounds the manor.

As she watches them work, she begins to notice that there are more changes than just the gardening. The shutters and drapes on the first floor have been opened, allowing for a small peek into the opulence of the manor within. Every now and then a servant wanders by a window carrying cleaning supplies or moving furniture.

Transfixed by the bustle of the house – and content to sit and watch -- she almost doesn't hear the soft voice calling out to her.

"Miss?" it asks again, startling Emily into looking in its direction.

Behind her stands a gentleman in servant's uniform, likely employed by one of the lords on this side of town. "Yes, I'm so sorry I didn't hear you."

"That's alright, miss," he reassures. "The ladyship of the house saw you from her window and wanted to see if you were alright."

Emily flushes lightly, placing a hand to her chest. "That's very kind of your lady. I apologize for the inconvenience, my health demanded that I rest a moment before continuing on my way home."

"That's quite understandable, miss. My ladyship --- the Lady Camille Rameirez --- has asked that I invite you inside if you need anything."

"Oh, that's very kind of her." Emily tries to stand, leaning on the tree as she does so. "Truly. I should be on my way though."

"Miss," he says in a concerned tone, reaching out to steady her as she tries to walk on, "I must insist. Her ladyship would be more than happy to order an auto for you."

The shaking in her legs betrays her. "It would seem that would be a wise choice."

"Yes, Miss...?" He gently begins escorting her to the house behind them, one hand placed on her low back and the other holding her hand to keep her steady.

"Emily Brice," she says as he leads her up the front stairs.

"Ah! Apologies, we've only every corresponded with your husband through letters. My lady is quite fond of Robert's treasures."

She laughs as delicately as possible, still trying to avoid setting off another coughing attack as they enter the house. "Oh, I'm not married to Robert."

"Forgive me, I was unaware he had a sister."

"Oh goodness, no. We are..." she trails off for a moment, trying to find the best way to clarify their relationship. "We're more in-laws than direct relation."

"Understood. Apologies for any offense."

"None taken," she reassures, smiling at him as he gently seats her on the loveseat in the foyer. "Any easy mistake to make."

He makes another quick apology to her before disappearing up the stairs to fetch the Lady Camille. All through the foyer are various paintings and busts of historical figures proudly on display among fresh flowers. The room itself is bright and comfortable, decorated in silver, white, and powder blue, with plenty of light streaming in through the large windows.

The servant returns with a carafe of water and two glasses, placing them down on the table in front of Emily. Just behind him swans in the Lady Camille herself. Emily stands to greet her as she seemingly floats over, her beautiful blue dressing gown floating around her.

"Oh," she exclaims, giving Emily a quick glance over. "I'm so glad you decided to take my offer, Mrs Brice. I saw you sitting there from my desk and knew, right away, that I ought to invite you in at the least."

Emily smiles delicately, taking Camille's hand in hers and bowing low over it. "I truly appreciate the offer, you Ladyship, I..."

"Please," the other woman interrupts, guiding her back down to a seat on the loveseat behind them. "Call me Camille. I only married into the title and the airs."

Emily chuckles lightly but doesn't protest. "Again, I truly appreciate it, Camille. I believed I was more fit than my body agreed with."

"Easy to misjudge, especially on such a lovely day as this!" She carefully pours a glass of water for Emily and hands it to her. "Truth be told, I'm happy you accepted for my own selfish reasons. I needed the distraction from my own affairs."

"Oh, well, I'm glad we could be of mutual aid to each other, in that case."

"You seemed quite entranced with the goings-on at the Manchester Manor. I'm sure you've heard the exciting news?"

"Only but an hour ago. It finally has an occupant, I hear?"

"Indeed!" Camille glances around the room, much like Mable had before. "Rumor has it that he's quite the eccentric collector, he may be a good person for your brother-in-law to know."

"Have you had the chance to meet the new tenant?"

"Not yet, I'm afraid. Nor have I seen him around the house either. The only activity we've had here are the servants preparing the house."

Emily nods, sipping gently at the water. "We've lived here for quite some time now and this is probably the best I've ever seen the manor."

"Likewise," Camille agrees. "At first, Her Ladyship and I thought to take over the house, but it's far too large for our needs. It's surprising that a single man would have an interest."

"We're sure there isn't a lady involved?"

"Oh, absolutely! Any lady involved would be overseeing the progress on the house, arranging furniture, and making friends with their neighbors."

Emily doesn't protest, knowing that when the three of them had moved to town she had assumed that role herself. "Then it is indeed strange. Perhaps he does intend to settle down then. At least, that's the rumor I'm hearing around town."

"All speculation until he arrives." She pauses for a moment, looking pensively out the window. "I believe I did see him once, very briefly. It was odd. It was rather late in the evening, I wasn't able to get a good look at him. His attire seemed a bit on the outdated side, but he had the most brilliant shock of light blonde hair."

"It's interesting to me how no one knows much about this new tenant."

"Isn't it? The estate agent is the same that sold us our house, and so I asked him who our new neighbor was. He gave me the name Lyons but I haven't found a single mention of a Lord Lyons in my looking."

"Odd."

"Absolutely." Camille takes a sip of her water before changing the subject. "Oh, please extend my thanks to your brother-in-law for procuring a perfect replication of Chu's masterpiece work. It's such a joy to see the former beauty of the West Isles hanging in my hallway."

Emily winces slightly at the mention of the isles. "I'll be sure to do so. I was unaware that Robert had clients in town. He's away so often that I assumed most of his clients were elsewhere."

"He's been procuring pieces for our collection for years! Such a lovely man. I'm ashamed that we've never come to call."

"Please, don't be." Emily says a bit too hastily. "That is to say, as I'm sure you can imagine, our home is quite the mess thanks to his business."

Camille leans in towards Emily, speaking in a hushed tone. "That would be a welcome break from the stuffiness of this place."

A slow smile spreads across Emily's face. "I take it you're not at home in the trappings of the aristocratic life?"

"As I said, I married into it. Her Ladyship - my wife, Lucile - was obviously born into it and is far more at home with it. I was elevated from hardship thanks to her, but I find this life comes with more difficulties than my previous one had."

"It's freeing to have some kind of occupation outside of the endless cycles of parties and social engagements."

"Yes," Camille leans back again as her voice takes on a softer, more somber tone. "Lucile isn't fond of me working and she's gone so often on fundraising trips for the Rameirez Alliance. These days I seem to sit at home, answering letters from stuffy aristocrats who would prefer if we failed."

"I truly hope you succeed despite them."

"Oh, we shall. The preservation of culture is far more important than their capitalistic aims." Camille laughs as the servant returns to the room. "Yes, Benjamin?"

He bows towards her. "The auto is ready, my lady."

She claps her hands together and smiles over at Emily. "Wonderful, thank you! It has been such a pleasure, Emily."

All three of them move towards the door where Emily bows towards Camille, out of habit. Camille laughs, wrapping her arms tightly around Emily and gives her a squeeze. The sudden warmth and familiarity melts any tension in her body.

"Thank you again for your kindness, Camille. I will certainly see you again soon."

"Oh!" Camille exclaims, letting Emily go and rushing over to a side table where a pen and paper sit. She quickly writes something down before handing it over to Emily, "Our direct line. Please, call whenever you like. I'm so often bored here and at the least a call would distract me."

"I will certainly call soon then." Emily gently takes her hand and gives it a slight squeeze before allowing herself to be led towards the door by Benjamin.

Benjamin helps Emily down the front stairs, gently leading her down each as one would a child. She doesn't protest as he hands her into the auto either. As the auto drives off, she waves to Camille who enthusiastically returns the gesture from her front porch.

The ride itself doesn't take long. Knowing his place, the driver keeps to himself and says little. Emily leans back into the cushions, glad for the temporary silence.

However, she is barely back home when she hears someone knocking at the door. She sighs, a bit tired and flustered, but opens the door with a smile nonetheless.

"Good day, ma'am." He says, bowing low to her.

His appearance is unusual in a way that Emily can't quite put her finger on. Though he is dressed handsomely in a very fine servant's uniform, something about the paleness of his complexion does not comfort her. His face appears haunted beneath his well-groomed beard --- gaunt, is the word that comes to her mind --- and his actions a bit too rigid.

"Good afternoon," she replies softly. "May I help you?"

From an inner pocket in his jacket, the servant produces a sealed letter and hands it over to Emily. "His honorable Lordship Lyons is pleased to announce his arrival in the neighborhood. A formal invitation to join him in a housewarming ball is soon to follow."

"I will pass this along to my...master," she says hesitatingly. "Thank you."

Once again the servant bows rigidly to her. Emily watches after him, an expression of confusion and suspicion dragging the corners of her mouth down. Shaking her head, she turns the letter over and holds it up to the fading sunlight.

The paper is quite thick, making it difficult for her to make out anything through the layers. It's the seal that holds her attention. Dual lions fiercely facing one another over a coat of arms, an antiquated family crest as far as she can tell.

It reminds her of a seal she's seen before but can't put her finger on now. Mulling it over, she heads up the stairs to Robert's office.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Despite the late hour of Robert's return home the energy in the house is full of excitement. As the trio sits down to a delayed dinner, he bursts into the home with an infectious enthusiasm that delays dinner even further. There are no protests as he steals Vic away into his office.

"Thank you for indulging me," he apologizes, leading her into his office. "I'm going to need your help with this."

Pleasantly surprised, Vic asks, "Did something happen after we left?"

He crosses to his desk, stride wide and his grin even more so. "Yes! Remember the mysterious buyer that bought half of the collection?"

"I think so? Some details are a bit fuzzy from that meeting..."

"They decided, a few hours before I left, to relinquish half of their share. It isn't everything that I wanted, but there are a few gems in the group."

"That's wonderful!" She's sits at his desk while he begins rummaging through scattered papers. "What do you need me to do?"

"Shipping coordination."

Immediately the smile on Vic's face falls, disappointed in the lack of glamour the role conveys. "Not curation or finding buyers?"

Robert looks up at her from the papers. "Vic, this is just as important --- if not more important --- than that."

Not quite believing him, she crosses her arms and sulks into the chair. He tries not to chuckle at her sulking, instead going back to shuffling papers about.

"Of course, this would be a lot easier if I could just find..." he mutters to himself.

Exhausting one half of the desk, he turns his attention to the small pile of letters on the other half. Most of the letters on bottom have been opened, with the newest sitting unopened on top. Robert picks up the pile of them and begins shuffling through them as he finally sits down.

He shuffles through a few of the opened letters before he finds what he's looking for.

"Here we are!" He delicately folds the letter to highlight an address and name, "This is the information for my usual shipping company, Ryerson's Coordination. You'll want to speak with Luke Ryerson, he's worked with me in the past."

"Why can't Johann take care of it?" Vic whines, accepting the letter.

"Because, he's busy doing..."

A familiar seal on an unopened letter stops him mid-sentence. The dual lions, reared towards each other, stamped in gold wax. He hastily turns the letter over to see who it's from.

"Doing what?" Vic asks, suddenly concerned as she watches Robert's expression change.

He turns the letter over in his hand, looking for clues before opening it. "Vic, would you please have Emily come up?"

"Why?"

Robert gives her a piercing look. "Vic, please."

Sighing, Vic gets to her feet and marches over to the door. As she opens it she turns and salutes Robert with the letter in hand, "Right away, sir."

He cringes a bit when she slams the door behind her, immediately regretting being so stern. Running a hand through his hair, he looks down at the letter in his other hand. The seal holding it together feels as if it's taunting him as he slides a letter-opener underneath to lift it off.

It takes him a moment to find the will to unfold the letter. There's only one person he knows of that would use this seal. One person that floats to the top of his memory like a bloated corpse from the depths.

His breath catches as he finally opens it, revealing beautiful curving calligraphy and delicate drawings of lions in opposite corners of the head and foot. Robert blinks several times, not quite convinced what his eyes are showing him is real.

A soft knock at the door pulls his attention away. "Yes, come in."

Emily timidly steps into the room, leaving the door slightly ajar behind her. "Vic said you wanted to see me?"

Robert nods and quickly glances back down at the letter. "It seems we have a new tenant at the Manchester house?"

"Correct," Emily sighs as she crosses to the desk and gently lowers herself into the chair across from him. "I only learned about it yesterday."

"There's no address marked on the letter."

"It was hand delivered."

He frowns and shifts in his seat. "By whom?"

"A servant of Lord Lyons." Emily, sensing where the conversation is going, tries to reassure him, "I don't think it's Christophe, Robert."

"What makes you think that?" Ice creeps into his voice as his defensiveness increases.

Emily takes it in stride, folding her hands in her lap. "He's left us well enough alone for nearly seven years. Why would he start harassing us now?"

"He's crazy, he doesn't have to have a reason." Robert rebuts. "Besides, he's been sending pieces of Claire's diary for over a year now. He knows where we are, this could be him toying with us."

She shakes her head. "I won't try and convince you out of your ideas, Robert, I know better than that. All I'll say is that he hasn't even moved in yet. It's too early for your paranoia."

Robert paces to the window overlooking the front of the house and stares out at the night sky. A full moon hangs overhead, wispy clouds float across its face, creating a golden halo around it. As he stares his frown deepens.

"You said a servant delivered this?"

"Yes."

"What did he look like?"

"Pale, blonde, well-dressed." Emily hesitates to say more but crumples as Robert turns and gives her a stern look. "Oh, fine. He was unusually pale and bland seeming. Very rigid in his movements. Dressed in red servant's garb embroidered with gold thread."

"Eyes glazed over? Unusually formal in speech?"

Emily sighs, "Yes, and if you're thinking what I think you're thinking..."

"He's a ghoul, Em. Red and gold uniforms are undoubtedly Christophe's."

"He could've changed them."

"Unlikely. He hasn't changed them for decades now."

Emily shakes her head. "Robert, we can't run away."

"We will if we have to."

"I can't run away and I'm tired of keeping secrets. It'll ruin my health to be away from Tobey."

Robert pounds the window frame with his fist. "We'll take him too. We'll leave the continent, go into hiding."

"Stop!" Her fists clinch and then unclinch themselves as Emily tries not to give in to her growing frustration. "Enough. What about Vic? Are you just going to disappear on her and everyone else?"

"I'll bring her too, if it comes to that."

"If you really suspect this is Christophe, then you need to tell her everything and let her decide."

Robert's mind races through all the possible ways to tell Vic. All of them end with her running away as her nightmares suddenly become reality. He tries to shake the thoughts out of his head.

"No."

His refusal hangs in the air between them. Emily sighs and shakes her head, looking down at her clenched fists.

"Send your husband up, I need to speak with him." He doesn't turn to face her, too absorbed in his thoughts.

The door swings wide as if Johann had been waiting for his cue. He stands impassively in the doorway, for a moment more mountain than man. As he strides towards Emily, placing a warm hand on her shoulder, he stares Robert down.

Robert peels himself away from the window, ignoring Johann's displeasure as he takes his seat again. "Thank you, Emily. I'll keep that in mind."

Emily rubs Johann's hand on her shoulder. He squeezes it briefly, not ready to let her go, but she stands regardless and pulls it off of her. They stare at one another for a moment before she shakes her head and leaves, closing the door quietly behind her.

"She's right, Robert." Johann declares as he paces over to the window himself. He shivers at the sight of the moon.

"You heard everything then?"

"Enough to know that you're chasing phantoms again."

Robert leans his elbows on the desk, holding his head in both hands. "We aren't safe anywhere."

"Then stop hiding!" Johann roars, turning around to look at Robert. "He's been toying with us for years, Robert. If he wanted to hurt you, he would have done it by now."

"The letters..."

"Oh, throw the damn things on the fire! I know you loved her, but Robert, he can only hurt you the longer you hold on to Claire."

Robert shuts his eyes at the mention of her name. The golden curls bounce before his eyes, her beautiful smile beaming under the moonlight flooding his mind. He grips his hair at the root and tugs gently.

"She didn't deserve this. I never should have insisted on helping her, it only put her in danger."

Johann sighs and crosses to the other man, rubbing his back reassuringly. "That's his game. The more guilt you feel over her, the more he wins."

"I know," Robert sighs, releasing his grip on his hair. "I know. These letters just torment me. I need to know what happened. Why we found her like we did."

"You already know, Robert."

"There's more to it. I have to prove he's responsible!"

"The Council already ruled it was suicide brought on by the madness. She lost her mind, Robert, no matter how much you want to believe otherwise."

"Because he wouldn't leave her alone!" Robert yells as he stands to pace the length of the room. "She knew what depraved aims he had and he kept toying with her mind."

"I know that, I was there! But you know how the Council is! Even if you did have evidence of it, they'd never re-open an investigation."

"Damn the Council!" He spits as he violently knocks a pile of books to the floor.

"I know, I know. Just, please, let her memory rest in peace. You're only ruining the good moments by holding on to this."

Robert stops in his tracks and takes a deep breath, exhaling slowly as he says, "She called me a monster. Uncaring, compassion-less. He was trying to turn her against me."

"Robert," Johann's voice softens and he gently puts a hand on his friend's shoulder. "She's gone. He can't turn her away from you anymore in your memories."

Robert resists the urge to shrug Johann off. Instead, he stares down at the floor, unsure what else to say. He closes his eyes where the demented laughing face of Christophe waits for him.

"It's still him in that house." Robert declares, moving back to his desk and sulking into his chair.

Sensing that he's not getting anywhere, Johann moves to the door and sighs. "Maybe it is, I don't know. Just, please, try to be open to the possibility it isn't?"

Robert lifts his head and meets Johann's sincere gaze. "Fine. I promise to entertain the possibility he isn't Christophe."

"I'll take what I can get. Don't keep Vic awake with your pacing."

"I'll do my best," Robert replies sourly as Johann shuts the door behind him.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

It thankfully doesn't take Vic long to locate the offices of the Ryerson Coordinators. The small front office stands just off to the side of the train station, no signage out front to announce them. Inside she can see one person lounging, feet on their desk and a book in hand, clearly with nothing better to do.

At first she thinks she has the wrong place. As she enters, the man at the desk doesn't lower his book nor acknowledge her presence, instead choosing to turn the page over and continue reading. She stands there awkwardly for a moment before clearing her throat.

"Moment," replies a gruff, scratchy voice.

Vic clutches her hands behind her back, gently tugging at the newly shortened sleeves of her blouse. Eventually the clerk lets out a soft chuckle and folds over the corner of the page he was just reading. Vic winces as he closes the book and casually tosses it to the desk.

"How can I help ya, missy?"

"I have an appointment with Luke about a shipment?"

The man nods and searches through an appointment book his feet had been resting on. "Ya Vic, right? Robert's assistant?"

"That's correct."

"One second." He gets up and wanders off to the back. After a moment, he pokes his head back out and motions for her to come back.

She timidly walks around the desk, spying the cover of the novel carelessly discarded --- *The Good Lord's Twilight*. Something about the title makes her smile as she imagines a thrilling mystery stuck between its pages. As she crosses into the next room, the portly clerk motions her to a seat while trying to excuse himself from the room without his belly hitting her.

The man behind the desk --- Luke, she assumes --- does not look up from his ledger nor acknowledge her entrance. Instead he holds a pair of spectacles to his weathered and tanned face, causing the wrinkles on his face to deepen as he squints against its failing prescription. Eventually he tosses them onto the ledger and leans back in his chair, crossing his legs underneath the desk.

"Well," he begins, rolling up his sleeves, "never imagine Robert hiring anyone other than that large brute usually with him. Certainly not one as pretty as yerself."

Vic blushes as she's caught off guard. "He sent me to discuss the delivery from Archer."

"Right to business, I like that." Luke leans forward and peers at her for a long moment before settling back into his chair again. "I'm afraid it'll be delayed."

"By how long?"

Luke shrugs. "A few days at most. Archer is sending the collection over in bulk, but it's going two differen' places, love. One fer you and one fer the Lord Lyons at Manchester Manor."

The mention of the manor catches Vic's attention. "Wait, the manor has finally been occupied?"

"Haven't you heard the news, girlie?" Luke's face brightens as he puffs out his chest, hooking his thumbs in his suspenders. "His Lordship requested our services exclusively to deliver his belongings."

Vic tries not to laugh at the self-importance oozing from Luke. While she finds it silly that a hardworking man would take such pride in working for the wealthy, it gives her an idea.

"Goodness," Vic declares, placing a hand to her chest in mock admiration. "That must be quite a lot to handle!"

She tries not to smile as the appeal to his ego works. "The trust His Lordship has placed in us isn't misplaced, girlie. Robert only uses a fraction of our services, but we specialize in high volume requests."

"Is that so?"

"Aye. Our network spans the continent, thanks to the contract we have with the Continental Trainworks Corporation. Exclusive long-haul shippers, we are." Vic tries not to roll her eyes as he raises his chin in smug defiance. "It's an honor, I say, to be working with such a fine gentleman as His Lordship."

"I can only imagine..."

"Indeed you only can!" He interjects, leaning onto the desk, pointing a calloused finger accusatorial at her. "My pa and I built this company when I was a small lad. We worked hard with anyone that came through that there door and practically built these rail lines. If he only knew we were working with these fancy men now, rest his soul."

Vic nods along. "I'm sure he would be very impressed. His Lordship must be very well off to be able to afford the Manchester Manor."

"Aye," Luke leans back again, thumbs hooked lower on his suspenders now, elbows splayed wide on the arm rests. "He's sparing no expense for this cargo, I can tell ya that."

"Must be quite well-off then?" Vic feigns more girlish interest.

"Oh ho, girlie! Got yer eye on some class mobility, do ya?"

She mocks affront, placing a hand to her chest. "Only professional curiosity, now! It isn't every day a wealthy new neighbor moves to town."

"Oh, is it now? Minx." He laughs to himself briefly before giving in, "Professionally, eh? Well, I never actually met him. Each time there's a shipment coming in, one of them brick-built boys comes down to pick it up. Settles his accounts other ways too."

"Brick-built boys?"

"Large, tall, sturdier than an old brick yard. Crew men say they seen 'em lift tons of crates at a time."

"Seems a bit much." Vic sits back in her chair as well, resisting the urge to twirl a stray curl.

"They don't say much. Just come in, load the crates in the carts, and then unload em at the house."

"Strange..."

Luke pauses for a second, before shrugging. "These rich aristocratic types are always strange, love. We just know better than to ask what's in the crates."

"Must be valuable then to go through so much trouble."

"You'd know more about that than me. With this order from Archer, His Lordship has told us to prepare for at least four of his boys to come down and help with."

"Well," she mumbles, "I suppose we ought to pick our part of the collection up the following day then."

"Suppose you will be then." The corner of his mouth twitches upward as he turns to his desk calendar. "You and uh...whats-his-name, the tall ginger one?"

"Johann?"

"Right, yea, Johann. He coming too?" Luke grabs a nearby pencil and looks up at her expectantly.

"More than likely."

"Then 'more than likely', " Luke teasingly mocks her, "you've got yourself an appointment for 10AM, a week from today."

"One of us will be there." Vic affirms, holding out a hand to him.

Luke laughs, taking her hand and bowing over it as she does the same. "Robert always says the same thing."

The comparison between her and Robert brings a blush to her face. "Wonderful doing business with you."

Luke, still laughing and shaking his head, leads her back out to the front. The clerk doesn't even bother to look up from his book, only tucks his feet under the desk as they emerge from the office. Vic can feel the blush deepening on her face as they approach the door.

"We'll see ya a week from now, Vic," Luke laughingly says. "Just let Johann know it'll be in yard 2. He knows where to go."

Not sure how to respond, Vic nods. "Yard 2, understood."

"Good meeting ya, tell everyone I says hi." Luke pats her on the shoulder before ducking back into the office.

It isn't until the evening that Vic has the chance to update Robert. As she sprawls about in bed, this time absorbed in a history book, she hears his tell-tale heavy pacing. Rolling her eyes playfully, she gets out of bed and heads up to his office.

Unlike him, the door to the office is left hanging right open. Not seeing him at his desk Vic steps out from behind the door as Robert careens in from the other side. He collides with her - and the door - dropping the letters in his hands.

"Elder's sake!" He swears under his breath, eyeing Vic up and down in shock.
"Where did you come from?"

"Behind the door," she answers simply. "Didn't mean to scare you, the door was wide open."

Robert stoops to pick up the scattered letters from the ground. "Yes, I was just coming to close it. Are you alright?"

"Startled just as much as you are."

Robert, letters clutched to his chest now, gives her a glance over as she straightens herself out. He begins to chuckle to himself as she brushes some loose strands of hair out of her eyes. Vic flushes slightly, laughing along with him.

They continue to laugh and walk over to his desk together, Robert leading the way. Taking his seat, he watches the way her blush creeps across her nose and into her cheeks. A desire to run his thumb along it comes over him.

Vic turns her head towards the empty fireplace. "It's getting colder out," she comments blandly.

"I hadn't really noticed," he replies. He watches her for a moment longer before turning his attention to the fireplace as well. "Was there something you needed?"

"Oh, yes," she turns back to look at him. "I spoke with Luke this afternoon. We're scheduled for pick-up at 10 in the morning, next week."

"Excellent," Robert continues to stare off, hesitating for a moment before asking, "Did you learn anything about our mystery collector?"

Vic crosses her arms and states, rather defiantly, at him. "I'm not spying on your competition for you."

"I wasn't asking you to." He turns towards her. "Luke, however, loves to run his mouth."

"True."

"So, what did you find out?" Robert asks again, a sly smile on his face.

Before she can begin, there is a knock at the door. "Come in," Robert calls as Johann enters the room.

"Evening," he says as he approaches the desk. "Emily wanted to know if you're joining us for dinner tonight, Robert."

"No." Johann nods and begins to head back towards the door. "Hold on. I did want to speak to you though."

"I can come back, I don't want to interrupt."

"It's fine. Vic was just telling me about her meeting with Luke." He gestures for Vic to continue as Johann turns to her.

"Right. All I was going to say is that the other half of the shipment is going to Manchester Manor before ours." The two men quickly look over at one another. Vic frowns as she realizes she may once again be out of the loop on something. "Did you know that the manor had a new owner?"

"Only found out recently..." Robert mutters. "Go on."

"Lord Lyons, is the name that I think Luke gave. Said a lot of the crew are unsettled by the men he sends over to collect shipments."

"Unsettled how?" Johann's voice is low, serious.

Vic shrugs, trying to appear nonchalant. "All he said is they're huge and have no trouble with the crates, that they can lift several by themselves."

"Did he say anything about this Lord Lyons?" Robert asks.

"No," she admits, shrugging. "Nothing of note. Seemed more interested in bragging about the company."

Robert sighs, leaning back into his chair. "That's the second thing Luke loves to do."

Vic smiles and nods. "That he does."

The three of them lapse into a strangely tense silence. Vic shifts uncomfortably in her seat while Johann stares out the window. Robert looks down at his desk, frowning.

Finally, Vic gets up from her seat as the silence gets too uncomfortable to bear. "I'll leave you two to talk."

"Hold on," Robert turns to look at her before she can reach the door. "Why don't you fill Johann in on the plan?"

"Right, pickup will be next week, 10 in the morning. Bay 2, I think he said?"

Johann nods as he takes her seat. "Yard 2. The usual spot."

Vic nods and then quickly exits before Robert can draw her in to any further conversation. The two men look at one another while the door shuts abruptly behind her.

"Lord Lyons, huh." Johann finally says, looking over at the fire.

Robert runs a hand through his beard. "The crew being unsettled by his men worries me."

"I'll keep an eye out for anyone out of the ordinary," Johann offers. "What did you want to talk about?"

As if jolted from a recollection of a dream, Robert remembers the letters he had been reading before colliding with Vic. He pulls out both the letter announcing the arrival of Lord Lyons and an unmarked letter from the pile. With the seals face up, he lays them out on the desk for Johann to look at.

Skeptical, Johann picks both up and looks them over. Nothing immediately stands out to him and he places them back on the desk.

"Nothing looked similar to you?" Robert asks, frowning.

"No, should it?"

Robert flips the letters back over so their seals face upwards. He gestures down at them, leaning back in his chair.

Johann squints at them again but comes away shrugging. One, a pair of lions reared back and growling at each other over a family crest. The other, the same pair of lions fighting over an overflowing goblet.

"Aren't they suspiciously similar?" Robert leads, raising an eyebrow.

Johann sighs. "Not suspiciously, no. Robert, please."

He crosses his arms. "It's too similar. Almost exact. The one with the goblet is Christophe's official seal from the city."

"One of them is from a new neighbor, the other is a diary page from your dead lover. They are not the same."

Robert immediately stiffens. "It's him, I know it."

Johann shakes his head dejectedly and slumps down into his chair. "A lion wax seal does not mean this Lord Lyons is Christophe."

"They share the same last name."

"This would be the first time he's used his actual last name. Besides, it was a common enough family name on the Porto Origin continent."

The look on Robert's face turns into a scowl. He gets to his feet and begins pacing the length of the room, footfalls heavy on the wooden floor as he marches. Johann leans back, crosses his arms, and watches impassively.

"He only bought the relics related to the Nenalo tribe." Robert finally says, stopping in his tracks and staring off out the window.

"The tribe that was turned by the vampyr during the war?"

"Yes, anything unrelated he released."

"Fine, that is a bit specific."

"You think? That's his...our tribe."

Johann shakes his head again, getting to his feet finally. "It still doesn't prove anything, Robert."

"It's got to be him." Robert insists, walking behind his desk.

"Listen to yourself. You have a few puzzle pieces but I don't think they add up to the picture you want to paint."

"Emily says he sent a ghoul here. Red and gold uniform, like they used to wear at the house."

Johann scoffs. "Emily doesn't know what a ghoul looks like, let alone what colors Christophe had them wear."

"But I do!" Feeling the tide of his anger rising, Robert marches off to the window and stares out at the yard. He shuts his eyes as he tries to calm himself down.

"Robert, it just..."

"It's him!" He seethes, pounding the window frame. "He's not just trying to scare me with Claire's diary pages. You know as well as I do what he's capable of. What the law of the city says he has to do to deserters."

Johann slowly gets to his feet, pushing away from the chair as if trying to push away a boulder. The chair gives a squeal of protest against the wood as it shifts backwards. He doesn't look at or say anything to Robert as he looks out over the yard with him.

"There are plenty of eccentric collectors that would want those artifacts," Johann turns to look at Robert before he has the chance to cut him off again. "Some would argue you fit that category. I still don't believe that makes Lord Lyons out to be Christophe, but I accept that it is strange."

Robert turns away from the window, leaning against the frame with his arms crossed. "The diary pages have stopped."

"Why didn't you say anything?" Johann frowns.

"Because I was waiting to see what he would do next."

"And you think this is it?"

Robert shrugs. "He's moving to town for a reason and he's making it publicly known for a reason as well."

"Trying to predict him is madness."

"You and Emily said we were safe, even when the letters started arriving. Are you sure that's still the case?"

Trapped in an argumentative corner, Johann throws up his hands and walks back to the desk. "I don't know. The timing is suspicious, I'll give you that, but I just don't think it's him, Robert."

"Fine," Robert finally gives in, the angry tide in his heart rolling back out. "Will you at least keep an ear out for rumors?"

"I always do regardless." Johann looks back down at the seals and shakes his head. "If you really think this is him, then you need to tell Vic."

"I can't."

He sighs and rubs the back of his neck. "You told Emily that too. Robert, you have to, she deserves to know what kind of danger she's in."

"She won't understand."

"You said that about Emily too and look how well she took it! Why are you being so stubborn about this?"

Robert gazes up at the waning moon and sighs. "I don't want to lose her. If she knew what we are, that the nightmare creatures she's afraid of were real - I don't think we'd ever see her again."

"Do you...love her?" Johann asks quietly, turning to look at his friend.

"I don't know." He shakes his head and looks over his shoulder at Johann. "I just want her near and out of harm."

"Then I think you should tell her. You can only protect her if she knows what's going on."

"I'll think about it."

"Please, try to tell her, sooner rather than later." Johann crosses to the door and hesitates for a moment, "Emily and I don't want her hurt either. If nothing else, do it for us." He leaves, shutting the door quietly behind himself.

Alone, Robert sighs deeply, uncrossing his arms to hang limply at his side in defeat. The desk and its overcrowded surface seem to taunt him as he stares at it. From his position, he can just make out the curves of Claire's elegant handwriting. A sudden urge to burn everything consumes him.

Once again he marches over to the desk, takes a long look at its contents, before pushing it all off the desk to scatter to the floor. Pages float to the ground like birds coming to land. He watches them, fighting back the urge to rip each and every one into small pieces.

As the last page settles on the pile, he sinks heavily into his chair.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

A week later, another hand delivered letter arrives.

Vic, being the only one home or awake, answers the door for a very gaunt looking servant in red and gold. "Good morning, may I help you?"

The servant pulls out a letter from his breast pocket, each movement stiff and staccato. It unnerves Vic to watch for some reason and she recoils slightly as he hands the letter out to her. Afraid that he might try and ensnare her somehow, she accepts the letter quickly.

"The Lord Lyons," he says in a monotone, "humbly requests your presence at his housewarming masked ball."

"Thank you," she mumbles back.

He says nothing else, turning instead to walk back to the street. Vic shuts the door and watches as he stiffly walks down the path, turns, and heads to their neighbors yard. A shiver runs down her spine once he's out of sight.

She turns the letter over in her hands, noticing the lion seal on the back. It somehow feels familiar to her but she can't place why. Out of curiosity, she holds the letter up to the light to make out its contents, but the paper is too thick for her to make out anything.

Though tempted to open it, she instead pockets it in her apron before going back to finishing the chores Emily had asked her to help with.

As she dusts about the parlor – a task largely gone by the wayside – Vic begins to fantasize about the opulence of the ball. Seeing all the fine ladies in their gowns and artful masks, her twirling about in a fashionable gown herself. Dancing across the room with various handsome men – and Robert.

She feels her heart beat a little faster at the thought and quickly tries to shake it from her mind.

Before she even has a second to get lost in thought again, the front door bursts open as Johann strides in with his arms full of parcels. He marches off to the kitchen as Emily brings up the rear, poking her head into the parlor.

"How goes the dusting?" She asks as she takes a look about.

"Done, for the most part. A few corners I can't reach are all that's left."

"Leave that for Johann, he usually does the high corners for me too." Emily collapses into a chair, her breathing a little heavy. "Thank you for the help. Do you mind if I ask for one more favor?"

Vic tucks her dusting rag into her apron. "Of course not. Feeling tired?"

"Only a little," she gives Vic a weak smile. "While I rest a moment, would you mind cutting some carrots for this evening's dinner? Robert should be joining us this evening and I just want it to feel special tonight."

The image of spinning around in Robert's arms comes to Vic's mind again. A pink flush spreads across the bridge of her nose as she tries to reign her imagination in.

"Of course. For a soup, right?"

"Yes. I left some chicken stock on the stove when we left, go ahead and fish the bones out and add the carrots."

"Happy to help." Vic smiles softly back at Emily before heading off towards the kitchen.

After handing the dusting rag off to Johann with instructions on what corners to clean, she begins preparing dinner. Her mind, at the same time, replays her imaginings and mixes them with memories. Memories of him catching and holding her in Richeland meld into fantasies of candlelit dance halls until it feels like it had at one time been real.

Deep in her daydreams and lost in the motions of cutting carrots, she never hears Emily enter the room.

"It smells so wonderful in here," Emily sighs, startling Vic. "Oh, I didn't mean to scare you."

"It's fine, I didn't hear you come in." Vic wipes her hands off on the corner of her apron and feels the letter bend in the pocket she tucked it in. "Oh, right," she mutters as she pulls it out. "Forgot that we got a letter."

Emily takes it from her, scrutinizing it for a moment. "Did this come in the mail?"

"No," Vic returns to her dicing. "A creepy servant of Lord Lyons came by."

"Thin and blonde?"

"That's him. He said it was an invite to a masked ball."

While Vic still has her attention turned to the vegetable cutting, Emily ever so swiftly opens the letter without damaging the seal. Opening it delicately, she walks over to Vic and drapes an arm over her shoulders.

"To the Brice Estate Residents," Emily begins reading in a stuffy tone. "It is with great pleasure that the Lord Lyons of Manchester Manor invites you to his Housewarming Masquerade. We are delighted to host you and one guest for an evening of revelry, merry-making, and frivolities. Masks are required for attendance. Please respond at your earliest convenience."

Vic laughs at Emily's affected air. "Sounds fancy."

Emily begins to fold it carefully again, pressing the seal back down firmly. "You'll look so beautiful. Don't worry, there's plenty of time for me to make you something."

Vic scrapes the chopped carrots into the soup pot while trying to hold back the blush that threatens to color her face. "Please, I doubt Robert is going to want to take me."

"Come on, dream a little," Emily entices. "Let's see, a sweetheart neckline would suit you perfectly. It would be a slim look, but anything is possible with the right undergarment."

"Don't you think that's a bit scandalous?"

"No one will know it's you! That's the best part!"

Vic sashays over to the sink, depositing her cutting board and knife delicately into it. "Robert will and I'm not sure I'm comfortable," she admits, flushing a little at the thought of being so exposed and so near him.

A sly smile plays on Emily's lips as she sees her friend beginning to blush. "Oh, I wouldn't worry about that either. You'll be too distracted by how handsome he is when he cleans himself up."

The added image of Robert in a well-tailored suit adds more color to her cheeks. "He's not going to take me anyway."

"Take you where?" Johann asks, appearing at the kitchen door with a bemused grin on his face.

Emily saunters over to her husband for a quick kiss before handing him the invitation. "We've been invited to a masked ball at the Manchester Manor."

"All of us?" He asks.

"Just two," Vic replies, busying herself in the wash-up in an effort to calm the fire in her cheeks.

Emily giggles. "Vic's embarrassed, but I'm sure Robert will take her."

Johann looks down at his wife and shakes his head. Frowning, Emily tilts her head back at him, confused by his response. He sighs, pulls her in, and kisses the top of her head.

"We'll see," he finally says. "Has Robert seen this yet?"

"No," Emily admits, her cheeks now turning pink. "We get all these unaddressed letters, I got curious."

Johann shakes his head at her but smiles softly despite himself. "Trying to get yourself in trouble, Em?"

"No, I'd strictly like to stay out of it these days." She sighs, breaking free from his arms and walking back to the soup on the stove. "Thank you for taking it to him."

Johann wastes no time and heads up to Robert's office. He stops for a second on the third floor landing and listens to the tell-tale sign of Robert's pacing. The heavy footfalls feel like the pulse of the house, steady but anxious.

Sighing as he looks down at the letter in his hand, Johann hesitates for a second longer in his delivery. He knows what he's about to walk into as soon as he opens the door. There hasn't been a positive change in the house for a week now and he knows this letter will only add to the growing anxiety.

He pinches the bridge of his nose, shutting his eyes to the world as he takes a deep breath, sighing on the exhale. "Better get it over with," he mutters to himself before knocking on the heavy door.

Without waiting for a reply, he opens the door a crack and sees Robert standing broodingly by the fire. One arm on the mantle, he looks up from the letter in his hand and motions for Johann to step inside. Frowning as he approaches, Johann beats back the desire to throw this new letter into the flames.

"Letter arrived while we were out," he tries to state plainly. Seeing the way Robert's face lights up, Johann hastily adds, "Emily says it's an invite to a masked ball at Manchester Manor."

Robert hastily takes the letter from Johann, scans its contents, and tosses it aside on the floor. "A masked house warming ball, strange choice."

Johann shrugs and strives to remain non-committal. "I suppose so."

"I'll take Vic." Robert declares abruptly, turning back to the fire and his letter.

Johann's frown deepens. "Do you really think that's wise?"

"He won't recognize her. It's far better than taking you or Em. He knows your faces, even with masks on."

"I'm still not sure it's a great idea if you haven't told her everything."

Robert turns back towards him, an eyebrow raised. "Suddenly concerned about Christophe being Lord Lyons?"

"No," Johann's tone is defensive as he pulls away from the fire. "Just..." he hesitates for only a moment before starting an animated tirade, "I heard some things down at the shipping yard the other day and I don't know. All the men were spooked by the manor's hired grunts, said they were all bigger than me. If those are the kinds of people he's hiring, I don't think she should be around there. She could get hurt."

"You think they're his wyrkin?"

"I don't know." Johann, frustrated, throws his hands in the air. "I thought maybe I smelled something of them lingering around the yard, but I couldn't tell. But we both know the only thing larger than me is a larger wyrkin."

Robert nods solemnly and walks over to his desk, laying the invite down. "True. If I bring you though, and if this Lord Lyons really is Christophe, things could escalate."

"I think that's inevitable no matter who goes."

"You're probably right." Robert admits, running a hand through his hair and taking a seat. "Still, you said it yourself, we can't assume he is Christophe."

"I know, I know. Emily would kill you if Vic got hurt though. She's so attached to her."

Robert sighs. "She is and I agree with her. The last thing I want is for Vic to get hurt in the course of all this."

Johann takes the seat across from Robert. "I just don't think it's wise to take her with you to this party."

"I hear you, but I think it will be fine. She's capable of figuring things out, with or without our advice. Besides, Vic has turned out to be quite adept at gathering information herself."

"That isn't comforting, given how things have been lately."

"I can't control what he might do, but I need more information. It's best that I don't raise any potential suspicions by bringing you."

"I still think you ought to tell her before you go."

"You've both tried to talk me out of seeing this new neighbor as Christophe." Robert crosses his arms. "If I get the sense that it's really him, I'll tell her."

Johann shakes his head, not seeing the sense in trying to protest further. "I trust that you know what you're doing. Just know you'll have to answer to Emily if anything happens to Vic."

"That's a risk I'm willing to take," a light smile plays at the corner of his lips. "Thank you, my friend. I know I haven't been myself these last couple weeks, I'm just glad to still have you by my side through this."

"Loyal to a fault." Johann admits as a similar smile comes over him. "I'll go let the girls know what's going on."

Robert chuckles to himself. "I'm sure they'll be overjoyed, or at least Emily will be."

"Too true." Johann heads towards the door, smile fading as he leaves the room.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Vic delicately picks at the different lace trimmings on display in Mable's shop. While other patrons chatter excitedly about this trim or that ribbon being the most fashionable, Vic's disinterest in the whole affair grows. It's only reluctantly that she gives in to Emily's questions about what she wants to add to her dress.

"What about this one?" Emily asks, holding up an intricate black lace for Vic to consider.

Vic shrugs. "It's alright."

Emily frowns, her frustration with Vic's disinterest growing. "Vic, please, we need to pick something today so I can finish this dress on time."

"I don't know," she huffs, picking up a different lace nearby in a wider width. "Here, this one is fine."

Emily sighs, seeing that her efforts to get Vic interested are going nowhere. Vic moves around the display absentmindedly, touching different laces as she goes without really looking at them. Shaking her head, Emily goes back to comparing different laces in the appropriate width, trying to pick one that would suit the bodice to Vic's dress best.

As she does so, the shop bell suddenly rings as a new customer enters the shop. A quiet falls over the other patrons there, all of them turning to look at a very handsome, pale, well-dressed man. He removes his hat as he enters, revealing long golden locks held back in a dark blue ribbon.

Immediately whispers begin to run around the room as everyone resumes their shopping. Some of the younger ladies in the room can't help but stare, though they try to do so as discreetly as possible. For his part, he smiles and nods towards anyone that he catches looking in his direction, seemingly pleased by others whispering about him so openly.

Trying to not draw too much attention to herself, Vic turns her head in the direction of another table full of ribbons while peering out of the corner of her eye at the stranger. It doesn't take her long to feel somewhat discomfited by his appearance --- extremely well-dressed, but covered head to toe in unseasonably thick fabrics.

As far as she can tell, despite the weather being on the warm side for the day, he doesn't appear to be uncomfortable at all.

Vic turns back to the counter of lace and moves slowly over to Emily. The way her lips form a thin line betrays Emily's unease. Without hesitation Vic joins arms with her, trying to offer the other woman a sense of comfort.

It takes them both --- and the rest of the ladies in the shop --- by some surprise when the handsome newcomer saunters over to where they are. For a moment he also pretends to be interested in the lace before flashing the pair of them with a dazzling smile. Vic finds herself taken aback by the awkward flush that comes to her face.

"Afternoon, ladies," his voice is low, clear, and honeyed. "I hope you don't mind my perusing along with you."

"N-not at all, sir." Vic stammers, gripping Emily's arm a bit tighter.

"Your Lordship," he corrects while a few of the nearby girls snicker to themselves. "Lord Cristobel Lyons. Pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"Victoria Halloway." She lowers her head towards him, unwilling to let go of Emily's arm in order to bow properly. "This is my friend, Missus Emily Brice."

Despite the smile having never left Lord Lyons face, it takes an almost sinister edge as she introduces Emily. If he knows anything about who they are, he doesn't mention it. Instead, he bows his head towards both of them.

"To be honest with you," he leans in towards them, as if letting them in on a secret, "I'm at a loss. Normally my tailor would handle this, but he's under the weather. Perhaps you two could help keep me fashionable?"

Emily tenses a little under Vic's hand, beginning to pull away from her. "I apologize, Your Lordship, but I'm not well-versed in current men's fashions. If you'll excuse me, I have a need to run by Mable."

Vic lets go of Emily's arm without fight, unsure if she should follow or remain disinterested in the lace before her. Lord Lyons gently shrugs in her direction as she turns to look at him.

A devious idea begins to form in Vic's mind, realizing she has a rare moment to learn something interesting while also being the envy of the room.

She smiles sweetly back at Lord Lyons. "I'd be happy to help, Your Lordship. Though I must say that your tailor clearly knows what suits you best."

His Lordship belies himself some by running a hand down the front of his damask jacket. "Thank you, Victoria. Though I admit that I have a habit of overseeing all of his decisions."

This comes as no surprise to Vic. "Excuse me for saying, but isn't it quite warm today with all those layers?"

"I suppose it is," he admits, peering out the window for a moment. "I hardly notice now. Can you keep a secret?"

Vic nods, wondering why he's bothering to tell her anything private about himself. Still, all eyes in the shop are still on them, some colored a deep jealous green. Deep inside there is a small part of her that relishes their stares.

"My poor skin is so delicate," he whispers to her. "Doctor's tell me it's an allergy to the light, but it's quite grotesque."

Something about the tone of his voice suddenly makes her shiver. "That's quite the thing to tell someone you've only just met."

Lord Lyons chuckles at her admonishment. "Well, I feel we should become friends." He locks eyes with her and grows serious for a moment, "We can be friends, don't you think?"

As he asks this, the room around Vic grows dark for a second before exploding with light.

Feeling as if a bolt of lightening has just struck her, she quickly shivers from her head to her toes. When she regains control of herself, the world seems softer somehow. All the sharp edges softened and even jealous eyes seem more friendly.

A fuzziness to her thoughts emerges, as if they were lost in a fog. She blinks rapidly, trying to think clearly, before her mouth automatically responds for her. "Of course, Your Lordship."

"Wonderful," the sly smile is back on his face, but Vic hardly notices. "What color dress will you be wearing?"

"Burgundy," she replies without hesitation. "We're out looking for trimmings and ribbons for the detailing."

Lord Lyons nods his head, imitating listening as he searches through the black lace available on the table. He picks up a wide width lace with a pattern of intricate vines and bursting roses, looks it over in the light, before handing it to Vic. A confused look comes over her face as she takes it from him.

"Don't you think this lace would look exquisite on such a gown?" His voice feels like it echoes in her mind, the richness of it soothing any defenses she may have had.

"Yes, it's very beautiful." In comparison, her own voice sounds vacant and hollow, lifeless.

"Buy it."

The command doesn't even phase Vic in the slightest. Without hesitation she marches over to the counter with the rest of their purchases and places it on top of

the pile. Several other women gather around the lace table, all with the sudden need to purchase lace themselves.

As she returns to Lord Lyons side, she is struck by how bright the light appears to be around him, as if the heavens themselves have decided to bless him. In her chest, a feeling of admiration and respect grows as she moves closer. She finds no need to question anything, willingly caught in this sense that she can trust him as one would an old friend.

Lord Lyons let's the smile on his face grow wider as he sees her glazed over expression. "Now, Victoria, tell me, who is the lucky man that will be accompanying you?"

A flush comes over her face. "Robert Brice."

"I see," his eyebrows raise slightly. "I'm sure you two will make a handsome couple."

The image of herself and Robert dancing together fills Vic's mind for a moment. The twirling and feeling of being held in his arms becoming a crystal clear image despite the mental haze. For a moment she forgets about Lord Lyons.

As she does, the fog in her mind begins to clear, leaving behind an uneasy feeling as it dissipates. She blinks a few times, confused, but Lord Lyons seems not to notice as he escorts her over to a table display of pearl necklaces.

"Now then," he recaptures her attention, his honeyed voice pushing away any lingering uneasiness for the moment, "shall we pick out the perfect necklace to complement this gown?"

Vic shakes her head. "Unfortunately, Your Lordship, I don't think my budget will allow that."

For the first time during their conversation, Lord Lyons frowns. Refusing to accept that as an answer, he snatches up a silver choker featuring a single metal leaf with a tear-drop shaped pearl dangling from the center. Without waiting for her to say anything, he places it and several hundred note bills onto her pile of notions.

"Please, let me spoil you," he flashes her a large grin. "After all, we're such good friends, aren't we?"

The feeling of admiration returns to her and Vic can't help but smile broadly. "Of course, Your Lordship!"

"Good, good," Lord Lyons sounds relieved as he rubs his hands together lightly. "I must be off, but this was a rather entertaining afternoon thanks to yourself, Victoria. I can't wait to host you and Robert in a few weeks time."

He turns to the rest of the shop and inclines his head towards the rest of the ladies watching him. Giggles can be heard over the sound of the shop bell as he steps out, the ladies then quickly moving on to whisper about how wonderfully kind His Lordship is. Vic watches him leave from the window and finds that the light around him is still soft and hazy as he moves down the street.

Once he's out of view, the feeling of adoration leaves her and the discomfort creeps back into her chest. The light, as far as Vic can tell, hasn't changed but everything seems sharper somehow. It all feels familiar to her for some reason, though where she's experienced this before eludes her for the moment as Emily comes up behind her.

"Did he finally leave?" She asks as she approaches with several strands of lace in her hand.

"Yes," Vic answers wistfully. "He's very friendly."

Emily frowns but doesn't press further. "I have some sample lace Mable found in her secret stash, if you wanted to take a look?"

"His Lordship already picked out the perfect lace. Here." Vic walks over to the counter, picking up the lace to show Emily.

"Ah," Emily's eyebrows knit together. "Are you sure you're feeling alright?"

"Oh yes!" Vic hands Emily the small stack of notes Lord Lyons left behind. "He's so generous too!"

This only deepens Emily's frown. Vic notices her companion's displeasure and feels that sense of discomfort growing in her chest again. The smile fades from her face.

"I suppose I feel a little out of sorts," Vic admits, shaking her head. "Maybe I've just been in here too long."

Emily, still worried, places a gentle hand on Vic's shoulder. "Why don't you go outside for a minute? I'll wrap up our purchases and be right out."

Vic nods and leaves Emily to pay for the notions. Outside, she leans against a small patch of exposed brick near the front of the shop. Its dissipating heat warms her back, comforting her and calming her confused mind.

She goes over the events that just took place, trying to pinpoint why the feeling of discomfort persists. The only thing she can think is that Lord Lyons is just overly friendly and generous, not really something she can fault him for. It's a positive thing for someone of his class to be so kind.

Still, something doesn't sit right in her heart.

As she begins to review things again, the door to the shop opens and Emily comes to collect her. Together they walk home in the fading late afternoon light, avoiding discussion on anything to do with His Lordship.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

It's late in the evening by the time Emily resumes working on Vic's ballgown. The crushed velvet burgundy dress delicately hangs from the dress-form, the full skirt spilling to the floor like wine. Pinning the last piece of lace across the top of the bodice, she steps back and admires the effect of her work.

"Looks beautiful," Johann compliments as he kisses the top of her head. "I'm sure it'll look gorgeous on her, but it would be stunning on you."

Emily flushes and playfully swats at him. "You're distracting me."

He kisses her again and settles into an armchair nearby, one of the few surfaces that isn't currently covered over in fabric or pattern pieces. Emily continues to stare at the effect the lace has on the dress, muttering to herself about if it wouldn't be better to use the lace to create fluttering sleeves instead. She contemplates it a moment longer before sighing in frustration as she sits down in the only other empty chair.

"Maybe I should just make a proper set of sleeves after all," she laments, taking a sip of her lukewarm tea.

Johann looks over to his wife and smiles. "The lace is beautiful and it'll be hot in that room. I'm sure it'll be enough to just create the sleeves from lace, love."

"I'd need a wider width or some additional fabric to make that work. Wish Lord Lyons hadn't convinced her on this one, Mable had so many better options in back that would have made this easier."

"I know you can figure it out." He tries to reassure her, letting her put down her cup before he asks, "You finally met our mysterious new neighbor then?"

"Vic did." Emily continues to contemplate the dress for a moment longer before turning to look at her husband. "It was very strange. I couldn't get her to commit to anything, then he walks in and suddenly she's picked out trim and a new necklace."

"Maybe she was just nervous?"

"Perhaps." Emily shrugs but seems unconvinced. "They seemed to get along well. He was the one that convinced her into all of it and even payed for it."

"How generous." Johann rubs the back of his neck. "She had no interest in anything, then suddenly he walks in and they're new best friends?"

Knowing her husband's tells, Emily frowns. "That's what it seemed like. He was very attentive towards us when he came in, it honestly made me uncomfortable."

"Did you talk to Robert about any of this?"

"No." The answer puts a temporary halt to their conversation, each staring off towards the dress before Emily continues. "It would only make him more paranoid."

"I know." Johann sighs.

"I left her there to talk to him while I went to go find Mable. When I came back, Vic was acting so strange."

"How so?"

Emily hesitates for a moment, picking absentmindedly at loose threads sticking to her skirt. "She just seemed dazed. Not quite present. The way she talked about him after he left, it was like she thought the world of him."

This makes Johann frown. "I really think we should tell Robert about this."

"Why? What do you suspect?"

"There have just been a number of strange things going on lately. I don't like the idea that someone could so easily influence Vic."

"I don't either but," Emily hesitates as she tries to find a way to more delicately ask, "do you really think Lord Lyons is Christophe?"

"I don't know." Johann shakes his head and rubs at his eyes. "Robert thinks he is. Ever since that deal with Arthur, he's been suspicious. Even more so now that the letters have stopped."

"Didn't you know him? Wouldn't you be able to tell if this was him?"

Uncomfortable with the way the conversation has turned, Johann gets up from his seat and absentmindedly wanders over to the dress. "I was young. I might know him if I saw him."

"Still, you had been with Robert for years before I met you. There must be something that would give him away?"

"He was persuasive, that part I remember. He could easily convince Claire to think whatever he wanted." He gently runs his fingers down the crushed velvet dress, "Em, I was so young when Robert rescued me. Christophe hated it and they would fight constantly about me being there. I barely saw him. Robert went out of his way to keep me away from Christophe as much as possible."

"I don't want to have to move again."

"I know."

"We've been here for nearly seven years now, completely fine and without incident. Then the letters started showing up a year ago." Her shoulders slump forward and she closes her eyes, trying not to cry. "I just want to live the rest of my life in peace."

Johann quickly crosses the room to her, kneeling down in front of her and taking his wife's hands in his. "Em, my love, please. I know this is frustrating to go through but that's why we should tell Robert about these things."

"Why can't he just leave Robert alone?"

Gently, he places his hand under her chin and lifts it so that he can look her in the eye. "It's the law of the city. All I know is that Robert will find a way to deal with this. He can't run from this anymore."

"What about Vic? If that's really Christophe, what would he do to her?"

"I don't know. I'm so tired of saying that, but it's true. We have to trust that there's a way all of us can stay safe."

Emily softens into his hand as Johann moves to rest it on her cheek. The two stare deeply into each other's eyes for a moment longer before Emily puts her arms around her husband, sinking to the floor with him. He holds her to him, stroking her hair softly and relishing the warmth of her body.

"It's going to be alright." He reassures her, burying his face into the crook of her neck.

"Please, just help Vic stay safe."

"I promise I will try."

The two stay in their embrace for a moment longer, neither willing to part and move on with their evening. Johann kisses her neck sweetly, trailing them from behind her ear to the tops of her shoulder. Emily sighs, rubbing her hands along his back.

He holds her for a moment longer before pulling away. "I should let Robert know before it gets any later."

Emily nods and moves herself back into her chair with Johann's help. He gently kisses the top of her head again before heading out the door.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

As usual, Johann finds Robert in his study.

Robert has the lights off, only the fire providing any light to the room. He stands looking out the large front window, fist resting against his lips as he does so. Lost in his own thoughts, he doesn't hear Johann enter or approach.

Johann clears his throat. "Evening."

"Evening." Robert replies, not at all startled by the other man's sudden appearance.
"Come to enjoy the view?"

"I wish," Johann looks at the quarter moon hanging overhead, closing his eyes to bask in its rays for a moment. "Emily had an odd encounter I thought you should know about."

Robert breaks his concentration with the sky and turns to look at Johann. "What kind of encounter?"

"While she and Vic were out earlier, they ran into Lord Lyons. Emily says she didn't spend much time with him, but Vic did."

A deep frown crosses Robert's face, the moon's light sharpening the lines on his deep complexion. He begins to open his mouth before thinking better of it and turning back to the window. Perplexed by his reaction, Johann reaches out and places a hand on his friend's shoulder.

"Is everything alright?" he asks out of concern.

"No."

The statement hangs in the air between them for a moment. Hesitantly, almost thinking better of it, Johann asks, "Do you have a plan for if it is him?"

Robert runs a hand through his hair, grabs a fistful, and gives a short tug at the roots. The sensation of the skin pulling taught forcing his thoughts back to reality. He walks over to his desk and grabs the lounge jacket hanging from the back of his chair.

"I need to make sure it's him first," he declares, fastening the jacket. "From there, I don't know. Going into deeper hiding is always an option."

Johann pounds his fist on the window frame, shaking his head, as Robert turns to look at him.

"We can't keep moving," Johann mutters bitterly. "This is cowardly. I'm tired of this psychopathic rich stalker running us out of places whenever he feels like."

Robert walks over to his friend, grabbing his arm. "Johann, please."

He shakes his head and pulls away. "No. We can't leave again, Robert."

"We won't," Robert concedes. "We won't. This is about Emily?"

"She depends on Tobey for her health. Moving could make her worse again."

"I hear you. We won't leave again."

"We can't keep running from him. He's been at us for years and I doubt he has the protection of the city anymore."

"He's been on the Council for nearly fifty years now."

"Then his term must be coming up. There has to be a way to unseat him. I doubt his spending the City's money all those years has gone over well."

Robert moves back to where he started, staring out the window and leaning against the frame. He crosses his arms, looks up at the moon again and sighs. There are no easy answers, but something deep in Robert's heart suspects that Johann is right.

"You're right," Robert admits, uncrossing his arms and running a hand through his hair again. "You're right. At the very least, we might have a chance to expose him to the council."

"Yes!" Johann exclaims, excitement replacing frustration. "Record what he does and at least get him in hot water for wasting city money on a personal vendetta."

A small smile comes to Robert's lips, but quickly fades away. "We'll see what happens. For now, I better find out what Vic knows."

Neither moves for a moment, transfixed by their thoughts and the light of the moon. Robert finds himself suddenly more tense than he was a moment ago as memories come floating to the surface of his mind. The very thought of heading back to that oppressive city full of whispers and scrutinizing looks weighs heavy on his shoulders.

Rolling them, he feels the knot beginning to form in his back. For a moment, as he stands tall, he remembers what it was like to be younger and full of defiant energy to tap into. It wasn't until he left the city, after Claire's death, that time began to assert itself over him and temper that desire to rebel.

Robert sighs. "Enough delaying of the inevitable."

He marches off down the stairs to Vic's room. Trying to square his shoulders and appear more confident than he feels, he knocks at her door. A quick muffled reply is given before he hears the latch to the door being pulled back.

Despite the late hour, Robert is still surprised to catch Vic in her dressing gown and sleep shift. Her brown curly hair half plaited while one hand holds her place in the process. She flushes a little and it softens him some.

"I didn't mean to disturb you," he apologizes softly, "I forgot how late it was already."

"That's alright. What's going on?" She begins plaiting her hair again, looking at him expectantly.

He sighs and again runs his hand through his hair. "I wanted to ask you about your meeting Lord Lyons today."

Vic frowns when he says this and Robert immediately regrets he even thought about bothering her. He watches her quickly finish her plait, tying the end of it off with a well-worn green ribbon.

"Why is this so urgent?"

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have bothered you."

"Robert, what's wrong?" Vic asks softly.

The gentle warmth of her voice soothes him as he leans into the door frame. "It's paranoia. At least that's what Johann and Emily accuse me of."

"I don't understand."

"This Christ..." he catches himself, "Lord Lyons character. Everything I hear about him makes me uncomfortable. I just want to know what kind of a man he is before we show up at his party."

Vic shakes her head, chuckling softly to herself, "What in the world have you heard that makes him someone worth being paranoid over?"

"Stalking, blackmail, harassment." Robert shrugs, turning to look at her, "Those are just a few of the things I've heard."

"That sounds like the exact behavior I would expect from someone of his class," she shrugs, gently finger combing the ends of her braid. "I don't think it's true though. You know how gossips are."

"How can you be so calm about that? Especially after meeting him today."

"He was perfectly friendly. The only thing odd about him was the amount of layers he was wearing."

"Nothing else?"

Vic frowns and puts a hand on her hip. "Nothing that's going to undo the ideas you already have in your head."

Robert looks up at the corner of the door frame and sighs. A part of him is amused that she's already figured out just how stubborn he can be about his ideas. Another part of him wishes he could just open his mouth and tell her everything.

As he pulls away from the wall, Vic reaches out and grabs his arm gently. "For what it's worth, he was very kind to offer to purchase what he did. It made me uncomfortable, people usually aren't that kind right away, but it didn't seem like he had anything to hide. I trust him."

The idea of her trusting an unknown person so easily bothers Robert but he tries not to let it show. A tenderness comes over him instead as he suddenly reaches out and gently rubs the end of her braid between a few fingers. She blushes but doesn't move to stop him, her own grip on his arm softening as she runs her palm up to his shoulder.

"Thank you," he says softly. "I promise to not bother you again like this."

Vic smiles, reaching out to play with the collar of his jacket. "That's alright."

A desperate need to pull her to him comes over Robert, but he pushes the feeling down as he stares into her hazel eyes. He bites down on the inside of his cheek as the things he'd like to tell her crash like a storm surge in his mind. None of them at all coherent.

Robert hesitates for a moment, feeling the coarse texture of her hair, and closes his eyes as he draws comfort from her proximity. "Good night, Vic," he finally whispers and drops her hair.

Disappointed, but not surprised, Vic moves back into her room. "Good night, Robert," she replies, watching him suddenly take off back up the stairs to his study.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

In all her years living in Westford, Vic has never seen Manchester Manor quite so well decorated. The front facade alone, decorated with pine garlands and silver thread that catches the light from the brass lanterns, seems pulled from a dream.

Several guests linger out in the front, chatting away merrily with goblets of a dark red punch in hand. They peer at her and Robert through their ornate masks of different styles, some more complex than others. Some jewel encrusted, some painted in bright displays of color.

As they step inside together, Vic holding on to Robert's arm, she whispers to him, "Everyone is so well dressed. I feel so bare compared to them."

Robert laughs softly, gently patting her hand. "You look beautiful, Vic. Don't let them shake you."

The compliment brings a blush to her face, barely visible from just below the cover of her mask. She tries to distract herself by looking around the room, trying to commit all the splendor of the evening to memory.

The main entranceway is filled to the brim with guests. A grand staircase divides the manor into two wings, though the majority of guests appear to be milling around the west wing. The banister and railing of the upper hallway is draped with blood red fabric and similar colored rugs cover the floors.

As a servant collects her shawl, she notices that no one seems to be hovering around the east wing. The dark wing immediately catches her attention and curiosity, though she fights back the temptation to go exploring. Instead she lets herself be led towards the ballroom and into the festivities of the evening.

The ballroom is swarming with dancers and their onlookers. Couples dance in a staggered line, the room not quite large enough to accommodate much more than line dancing. Along the walls stand those not dancing while overhead runs a long balcony with observers lounging in various chairs provided for their comfort.

Robert has no issue with making his way through the room, quickly moving past guests with a smile. Vic tries to follow as closely as she can but finds herself distracted by the dancing couples and general splendor. As she approaches the head of the room, near where the orchestra is playing, Robert suddenly slips out of her view.

Unsure where he slipped off to, Vic scans the room for him until she spots an elaborate mask that stops her cold. A white lion's face curled back into a mighty roar, with swirls of gold that emanate from its eyes and end in brilliant rubies. A pair of bright blue eyes underneath it catch hers and a slow smile stretches across its owner's face.

Suddenly, a hand grabs her arm. Heart racing, Vic turns around to see Robert holding on to her arm. He motions her on into the next room and she quickly follows.

The wood paneled walls create an air of intimacy where guests can seat themselves on dark brocade couches and velvet chairs. Dark red drapes hang from the cathedral ceiling, imposing and intimidating in their own way. A banquet table with refreshments sits at the far end near the open doors to the veranda.

Robert hands her a glass of what she assumes is a berry punch, he raises his own glass to her. "To a quiet evening."

They touch glasses and Vic greedily drinks hers, enjoying the taste of berry and spices. "I don't see how anything can be quiet this evening. I didn't even know the town had this many people in it."

"Professors and aristocrats, all of them." Robert laughs, "A party is as good a place as any to meet your future patron." As he says this, he raises his glass towards a beautiful lesbian couple wearing powder blue. "Surprised to see the Ladies Ramierez here, they seldom try to fund-raise in town."

"How can you even tell who is who?"

"You learn to recognize their manners and the small things about them. The Rameirez ladies love blue, it would be strange to see them at a party not wearing their signature color. Or," he gently points to a man in a dark green jacket wearing a mask shaped like a holly leaf, "Professor Li, whom I assume you know. He has a particular love of nature."

Feeling guilty that she had never learned this about her former colleague, Vic blushes. "I didn't realize you were so attentive."

He leans over and whispers to her, "I know you regularly fall asleep while reading. Who do you think comes in to turn your light out once everyone else has gone to bed?"

The admission of him entering her room takes Vic aback. A red hot flush colors her cheeks but she's largely unsure if she's offended or flattered. Hastily, she takes another sip of her punch.

A burst of laughter from outside catches their ears and both of them turn their head towards the open door leading out onto the veranda. Robert offers Vic his arm, she

accepts and links her arm in his as he leads her outside. She shivers against a chill evening breeze, a welcome relief after being inside the warm house.

From their position, Vic can see that the yard of the manor extends far beyond any she has seen in town. A large gazing pond fills most of the area, while old growth trees and manicured hedgerows create a sense of privacy along the gravel paths available. Far down at the other end of the house she can just make out another smaller uncovered veranda in the darkness.

Robert, meanwhile, appears deeply distracted by the guests. She watches as he scans the veranda, as if looking for someone in specific.

"Did you find who you were looking for?"

"What?" He looks at her, surprised at the question, "What makes you ask that?"

Vic shrugs. "It just seemed like you were expecting to find someone here. Was Doc Tobey supposed to be here?"

It takes him a second, but he eventually laughs. "No, no. He would never come to something like this."

"Then who are you looking for?"

"No one. At least, no one you would know."

She fixes him with a disgruntled look and Robert can't help but smirk playfully back at her.

As she finishes off her glass, Robert deftly takes the empty one from Vic and replaces it with his still full one. She offers no protest, accepting it readily. Though the flush in her cheeks won't go down and her body feels warm all over, she still continues to sip greedily.

From the ballroom she can just make out the orchestra beginning a series of spirited dance numbers. Without a word, she heads back inside leaving Robert to catch up with her.

A servant to the entrance of the ballroom takes her glass from her as she steps into the room. As she moves more into the room Vic finds herself swaying through the crowd in time to the music. Robert smiles to himself as he watches her transfixed expression light up as the dancers twirl about in front of them.

He instinctively places his hand at the small of her back as he leans in to whisper, "Would you like to dance?"

The drink causes Vic's blush to reach all the way from her chest up to her forehead. She gently bites her lip before responding softly, "Yes, but I don't know how."

"I'll show you. Let's move to the back of the room." Robert leads her off down the line.

As they approach the end of the line of dancers, the music stops and the dancers begin to move away from one another. The crowd around them applauds politely and makes way for them to rejoin the rest of the room. Over the crowd the conductor calls out the next dance.

"Do you know how to waltz?" He asks, smiling when she nods tentatively. "I knew you knew how to dance. This one is fairly easy, there are a series of lifts, but just let me worry about that."

Vic nods as he leads her out onto the floor. Nerves threaten to bubble up from her stomach and make her sick, but Vic finds herself instinctively being led by the music. They bow to one another from across the line and move to entwine themselves into graceful fusion with the music.

The waltz is on the slower side, something Vic is grateful for as her first few steps feel jumbled to her. Robert leads her patiently, leaning in to whisper, "Push off of my shoulders while I lift you."

Robert's grip shifts to just around her waist as he lifts her into the air, spinning around once before setting her back onto the ground. They rejoin hands, move through the steps again, and he lifts her at the end of the set. Predictable movements that Vic finds herself getting lost in.

All the spinning threatens to unbalance Robert. As they begin their next set, he scans the crowd for a focal point only to find his eye instantly drawn to the same white lion mask Vic had seen earlier in the evening. His blood runs cold as recognition dawns on him and a feeling of *deja vu* suddenly overtakes him.

They turn again. He quickly turns his head back to the lion mask, its owner now beginning to lift it from their face. Another lift, Vic's face turning pink from the twirling and the feeling of his surprisingly strong hands at her waist.

Robert almost drops her in haste as they start another revolution around the floor, his tempo increasing ever so slightly. Vic barely avoids having her foot stepped on as she tries to adjust.

Desperately he scans the crowd again for the lion mask, the compulsion to know who is beneath it overtaking him. It takes him a moment to find the only unmasked face in the crowd.

From amidst the sea of covered faces, Christophe stares back at Robert with a smug smile on his face.

Time slows and the music becomes distant. Though his body continues to move through the motions of the dance, Robert is numb to the sensation. His steps slow,

and though Vic seems to pull on him as she is lost in her own steps, he hardly notices.

Everything seems to center in on that hideous smile and the brilliant pair of cold blue eyes.

As they head into the last revolution, Robert tries to regain his focus. He lifts Vic one last time, putting her down too hard and causing her to step back onto her dress as she lands.

Feeling her weight beginning to fall backwards, Robert snaps back into reality and quickly wraps an arm around her waist. He steps forward to stabilize himself as he leans forward and catches her just a few centimeters from hitting the ground. Around them the crowd gasp and applaud the theatrics.

For a moment their eyes meet and Robert finds himself briefly forgetting his tormentor. He helps her straighten back up and escorts Vic off the floor. She sways on her feet, nearly bumping into several ladies waiting on the sidelines.

He swoops in to steady her as she loses her balance. "Are you alright?"

Vic clutches tightly onto his hand. "I'm just dizzy from the dance."

Without another word he leads her through the crowd to the banquet room. Still not seeing a sign of Christophe, or an open seat to let Vic rest in, they continue to move through the room to the veranda. He settles her onto a stone bench nearest to the steps to the garden, out of the way enough to be as private as the party will allow.

He kneels down before her, still holding on to her hand. "I found who I was looking for," he whispers to her.

"Oh, good," her words sound somewhat slurred and languid, as if she were dropping off to sleep.

"Will you be alright for a moment while I go speak with them?"

Vic closes her eyes but nods her agreement. For a moment Robert wrestles with himself about leaving her alone, drunk and half-asleep, on a veranda full of strangers. He sighs, squeezes her hand and stands.

A memory of Claire collapsing at a similar party plays in his mind. Her golden curls twirling as her expression shifts from joy to rage and on to exhaustion.

Remembering how she collapsed as her rage had run its course, throwing herself into inconsolable hysterics as she pounded the red velvet pillows of her bed until she had no more tears to cry.

On instinct, Robert holds Vic to him, burying his face in her hair to hold on to them both for just one more second. Maybe, he thinks, if he can just confront Christophe he can keep Vic and his memories safe.

Gently, he kisses the top of her head and softly says, "Wait here, I'll be back."

Leaning her gently back onto the railing, Vic begins to doze off for a moment. A longing tugs at Robert's heart as he stares at her, innocent and exposed in what might be a party full of lions. Without wasting another minute, he sighs and begins to march back through the crowd to find where Christophe has gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

A shrill laugh jolts Vic back to awareness. She groans lightly, putting a hand to her forehead as she straightens back up. The sound of the crowd around her sets off a light pounding in her head, enough to will her groggy and stumbling feet to carry her in any direction away from the noise.

She briefly considers the need to find Robert, but quickly discounts the idea as it would mean having to wade through the crowd. A hazy memory of him telling her to wait comes to her mind. Vic shrugs it off, unsure if it was real or she only dreamt it.

Without thinking, she makes her way down the stairs and begins wandering towards the far end of the house.

As she moves further away from the party, her head begins to clear some and she finds herself halfway towards the mysterious set of stairs she had seen earlier. The old growth trees hang overhead, shielding her in shadow as she wanders down the stone path. With each step the noise of the party gets further and further away until she feels completely alone in the dark.

Vic pauses for a moment, gazing up at the thick boughs overhead as they gently sway in a breeze, almost brushing the side of the house. Something about the way they loom overhead causes her to shiver, as if she expects these unfriendly trees to grab her and prevent her from reaching the other side. Without wasting another second, she gathers up her skirt and quickly continues onward.

There is a single low-powered wall sconce that provides just enough light for her to not trip up the stairs. Two glass paneled doors greet her at the top, exposing a dimly lit room beyond. Vic removes her mask and holds her face to the door, peering inside to see rows of bookshelves beyond.

Once again she takes a look around to see if anyone is watching her. In the distance, on the veranda at the other end, she can just make out the shadows of a group moving to take seats on the stone benches. She hopes none of them have their attention turned in her direction.

She tests the door handle and finds it unlocked, much to her surprise. It swings open easily and quietly, admitting her into what she assumes is a library.

The silence of the room is only broken up by the sound of a cackling fireplace off to her left, providing the only light for the whole room. Vic quickly glances off to her right, seeing rows of bookshelves arranged as neatly as the universities library. It's tempting to explore every shelf, but with the limited light provided she heads towards the in-built shelves surrounding the fireplace.

As she steps forward, the sound of her heel on the wooden floor startles her and she freezes, sure that someone must've heard it. A second passes. When no one rushes into the room, she slides her feet out of her shoes and continues on towards the shelves.

With the help of the firelight, she gets a better sense of the room. Every available shelf seems to be full of books and they seem to devour any available wall space. Two high-backed chairs are turned towards the fire, a small wooden end table between them. On the far wall, in the only space not taken up by shelves, is a simple looking door that Vic can only assume leads out to a hallway.

Alone, with hundreds of books available, it's impossible for Vic to resist the temptation to pick through them. She starts with the shelves nearest to the fire, hoping its soft light will allow her to find something interesting.

The first few titles she comes across seem to be language primers for a language she's never heard of. Moving down the shelves, the books become more esoteric in nature, with titles that confuse her with complicated concepts. It isn't until she moves closer to the fire that the collection turns to the subject of the vampyr.

Histories, legends, and translated texts line the shelves of the last bookcase section. Some she recognizes from Robert's collection while others seem far older or more obscure. Part of her is surprised to see so many different titles and Vic lets her fingers dance along their tops.

At the end of the row, hidden in the shadow cast by the bookcase, her fingers find one book shorter than all the rest.

Vic gently slides it out of its hiding spot. There is no title on the spine or the front cover. Intrigued, she walks over to one of the chairs and delicately opens it.

Curly cursive script fills the page. It's difficult for Vic to make out every word, but as she reads the first few sentences she realizes that this is not an academic text.

As she reads the first page – just a bland recounting of the day's events and the writer's hesitations -- a moment of realization hits Vic. Something about the way the letters curl and how pointy the peaks are on some seems familiar. A vague feeling that she's seen this somewhere before nags at her mind.

Vic turns to the back of the diary, noticing that the writing changes from relaxed and curved to hurried and sharp. A night and day contrast as the diary falls open to a missing page.

The sound of a door being thrown open at the other end of the room startles her before she can read on.

Desperate to not get caught, Vic tucks the diary under her arm, grabs her shoes and mask from the floor, and hastily makes her way to the door she had spotted earlier. Thumping footsteps grow louder as she gently shuts the door behind her.

Quickly, she scans the hallway for anyone who might have seen her emerging. Out of the corner of her eye, she sees someone disappear into the library before the door slams shut behind them. Another shiver runs down her spine for some reason, this time from a palpable tension in the air that had just managed to pass her by.

On the other side of the door she can just make out the sound of low, muffled, male voices speaking to one another. She can barely make out what they're saying. Not that she particularly wants to know.

Not keen to stick around, Vic casts another quick glance around the hallway before heading further away from the party. At random, she opens a room on the opposite side of the hall from the library and is pleased to find it mostly empty.

"Finally," she whispers, "alone."

The room is full of furniture covered over in white sheets, the soft light from the entranceway casting eerie shadows on them. Sounds of the party can be heard in the distance as she moves towards the window. She curls up in a spot that seems to get the most light and opens the diary in hopes of revealing its secrets.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

A part of him regrets leaving Vic on her own, but the frustration surging in Robert's chest can't be quelled. He marches through the crowd without care, knocking into guests as he makes his way back to the ballroom. The sounds of their offense follow him as he makes his way back to where he last saw Christophe.

He looks through the sea of masks and revealed faces, trying to spot the elusive white lion. All their faces blur into each other as he makes his way through the room.

It had been this way once before. Scanning the room for the companion mask to Christophe's. Aware that at any moment a scene would ensue and he would be the one to blame.

Claire. For a second he spots a young woman with blonde hair and he instinctively begins moving towards her, caught in an automatic response. As she turns towards her companion, Robert realizes where he is and stops himself mid-step. Quickly he pivots and begins walking towards the entranceway.

As he crosses the threshold into the other room, Robert spots the powerful gold and ruby eyes of the snarling lion.

The room seems to shift as all the details meld with his memories of that night. Frustration is replaced with panic as Robert's vision tunnels in on his tormentors face. Christophe turns his head away from the conversation he is engaged in and smiles over at Robert.

The room shifts as the tide of panic suddenly recedes. His body feels a million miles away as he stares at Christophe and the soulless smile that never seems to reach his cold eyes. Christophe inclines his head in the direction of the east wing of the house. A signal that Robert knows all too well.

Christophe excuses himself from his conversation with such geniality that it almost sickens Robert. Every party, always the same. Claire needed consoling and to be kept away from everyone, Christophe needed to ensure the guests continued to support him, and Robert needed to be the one to bear the brunt of responsibility should things not go as expected.

No matter the cause, he was always the one to blame.

As Christophe moves off towards the darkened hall, Robert finds his feet automatically following as they had done that night so long ago. Followed him into

her bedroom only to find her gone. Followed him to her room only to feel abandoned by the one person he had ever truly loved.

Christophe stops near a large set of doors, waiting for Robert to catch up. The cold smile gone from his face and replaced with disinterested disappointment, a look Robert has seen too many times to count.

Robert takes a deep breath, trying to keep the words from rushing out of his mouth. "What do you want from me?"

There is no answer. Instead, Christophe opens one of the doors and heads into the enormous library. Obediently Robert follows right behind him.

The door shuts loudly behind Robert as he tries to keep pace with Christophe. He knows what comes next. Shame shuffles his feet down the aisles of bookshelves.

Reality comes crashing back over him, a brief return to his body. He stops himself near the last row of shelves, panic settling back in. This was not how the evening was supposed to go.

As Christophe approaches the fireplace he tosses his mask into the chair Vic inhabited just a moment before.

"Oh please, Robert, do you think you're safer in the shadows?" Christophe's voice softly rumbles like a distant storm, a warning sign for Robert to not push his luck. "No matter how hard you try to conceal yourself, I always find you. Come, face me like a man for once."

Robert bristles as his feet obey, taking him to the edge of the firelight. He removes his mask. "Let's get this over with."

Christophe chuckles to himself. "Indeed, very brave."

"Just tell me what you want."

"Really, Robert, haven't we been through this enough now? Surely you know why I'm here."

"To torment me, chase me all over this earth, and haunt me until I turn myself in."

The cold smile returns to Christophe's face, tinged around the edges with calculated pity. "Is that what you think? How uncharitable. You're unsafe out here, haven't you figured out that I'm only trying to protect you?"

Robert tightens his grip on his mask as the tide of his temper rolls in. "Trying to protect me by stalking me and trying to kill me?"

"I'm only doing my duty as endowed to me by The Council, you know that." The smile on his face widens, turning sinister in the firelight.

"Damn The Council to the mountain's wrath! This is about Claire and always has been. I know it was you who drove her to madness in the first place!"

"Oh, yes, poor Claire. Poor Claire!" Christophe waves his arms dramatically, laughing cruelly. "Her and her tenuous grasp on reality. She was always weak in the head, Robert."

His mocking tone grates on Robert's ears. This is how it always would start. Though he tries to resist the pull of his anger, it cascades over him and drowns his more rational thoughts.

"She was on to you and you couldn't take having a human expose you for what you are!"

"This is childish, Robert. She knew nothing, she cooked up wild theories that couldn't be proven."

"You killed her before she had the chance."

Christophe's eyes narrow as he scans Robert quickly, sizing him up. Robert steels his expression and doesn't budge from his position, for a moment resolved to not be shaken. Neither man says anything more.

"You don't have any more proof of that than she ever did." Christophe smirks as he begins to laugh at Robert's bluff.

"The pieces of her diary that I have paint a compelling picture of you driving her to suicide, at the least!"

He laughs heartily before his expression falls serious. "I've sent you the mad ramblings of a woman who hated you."

"Enough!" Robert roars, the word pushing past his lips. "I have it in her own handwriting that she was manipulated all along."

"You have nothing." Robert detects the slight rumble in his voice. "All you have are the ramblings of a deranged woman in her last days. It was the Vampyr Madness, don't you remember, that's what they all said."

The faces of former friends appear before Robert's eyes, their looks of pity and disgust mixed across their faces. Whispers swirl in his mind as he recalls how they would discuss Claire behind their gloved hands. False sympathy for how much her deteriorating mind had affected their house.

Robert clenches his mask tightly, the edges digging into his palm, as he shakes the memories from his mind. "I know it was you. I'll prove it."

"The only proof is in my hands." Christophe counters as he shakes his head. "Or buried long ago in that house you abandoned."

"Then I'll find it."

"Your dedication is as admirable as it is foolish. In 50 years, you haven't stepped one foot towards returning. The house may still be in your name, but you and I both know how cruel the elements can be on a home left without repair."

Robert knows better than to try to continue his stubborn protestations. Echoes of fights long past remind him of the futility of pushing a point. His free hand guards his stomach reflexively as if anticipating an oncoming attack.

The pain from his strong grip on his mask finally begins to register as pain. As he relaxes his grip, the fight and frustration in his heart goes out, sinking back into the black waters of defeat.

Christophe notices the shift. "Is that all the fight you can muster now?"

Robert refuses to respond, continuing to stare down at the mask in his hands.

"Don't tell me that attractive young girl has got you tamed," he teases. Robert glares over at him, much to Christophe's glee. "Oh, indeed, it seems she has."

"What are you implying?" Robert again tries to keep his voice steady.

"Just this evening I saw how she looked at you while you danced. Cheeks flushed and breathless. You never did have any trouble convincing others to adore you."

"Nothing like that is going on between Vic and I."

"What is it about human women that attracts you so?"

"Drop this."

"Oh," Christophe chuckles, "it's so amusing when you try to deny how you feel."

Robert's feet move before he has a chance to think. He steps forward, closing the gap between him and Christophe, stopping just on the other side of the chair. Christophe smirks at him but Robert resists the urge to grab him by the lapel.

"Leave her out of this," his voice is low as he enunciates every word clearly.

The smirk never leaves Christophe's lips as he reaches across the back of the chair and grabs Robert's chin. Shocked at the familiarity, Robert freezes in place as Christophe rubs his thumb across Robert's bottom lip.

"How could I possibly resist, my love, when another woman stands between us?"

Frozen, Robert can only stare into the cold blue of Christophe's eyes. A flush creeps up his face as memories of embraces and the carnal comfort of his former lover flood his mind. The devastation of her departure requiring immediate comfort to heal.

Christophe moves in to kiss Robert passionately. As their lips make contact, Robert quickly steps back, eyes darting to the floor in shame.

"Come now, let me comfort you again. Like we used to." He once again grabs Robert's chin and tries to force him into looking at him. "Then you'll forget all about them."

Robert removes Christophe's hand from his face before turning and walking away back into the shadows. "Leave her out of this, Christophe."

"No," the ice in Christophe's voice forces Robert to stop and turn back around. "I don't think I will. I want to see you beg me to trade places with her. I want you to know, deep in that dark dead heart of yours, that you are mine and always have been."

A part of Robert wants to stay and retort, make a point of defying and denouncing everything that his former lover has to say. The dark water of distant memories drag him away again, out of body and into an endless sea. He stands there for a moment, dazed, trying to think of something to say or do.

A distant star suddenly appears overhead, a rational thought. He remembers Vic passed out on the veranda. His feet move again.

"It's too late, Robert!" Christophe calls after him, "The seed has already been planted."

Robert keeps walking on, his pace hastened by Christophe's taunts and laughter. All he can focus on is her, the only shining beacon in sight. As Christophe begins yet another round of taunts, Robert reaches the door and lets it slam behind him loudly as he exits back into the hallway.

Blind haste gives way to creeping shame as he begins to make his way through the crowd again. How could he have left her alone at such a vulnerable moment? Hadn't he learned anything over the years? What did he mean a seed had been planted?

He rushes through the ballroom guests, not stopping to apologize along the way, as he berates himself mentally for being so stupid.

When he arrives at the spot where he left her, panic rushes back in. In her place are two ladies chatting gleefully about how fine the party is and who they've been able to dance with over the course of the evening. Robert scans the rest of the area, afraid that his memory has lied to him and that he left her elsewhere on the patio.

His brief search of the stone benches turns up fruitless. As politely as possible, despite the tinge of panic in his voice, he interrupts the two ladies. "Did you happen to see a young lady in a long burgundy dress? Pearls on her mask?"

The two women shake their head and offer their apologies, when they arrived the bench had been empty. Robert thanks them and heads back inside, swearing under

his breath to all the stars for her to be safe. Hoping that she has just been swept away for the chance at another dance, he heads back to the ballroom but doesn't find her among the dancers nor those watching.

He leans up against the wall nearest to the entrance, giving himself a moment to breathe. The world feels blurry and out of focus, still trapped underwater and struggling to reach the surface. Something from deep within whispers to him that it's already too late, she's already been taken and he'll never find her now.

Without thinking, his hand rubs the space over his heart. Touching the lapel of his jacket reminds him of Emily only hours ago and the thought sends him back to reality.

Robert wills himself to move towards the entrance. The pale and zombie-like servant at the door offers to have an automobile brought around for him. This he politely declines. Despite feeling like lead, he knows that walking home will be the best way to shake off any lingering feelings.

Each step away from the manor brings more clarity. A breeze rustles the hedgerow leaves and the steady sound of his feet on the stone walkway bring him more into himself.

As he walks, he finds himself caught on the last thing Christophe had said. He frowns as he recalls the way Vic had so easily defended Christophe so soon after they'd just met.

"Damn him," he mutters under his breath, realizing what Christophe had meant.

Once again, a voice from deep within him whispers that there's no way of knowing where her allegiance lies. He sighs, running a hand through his hair in frustration. He could use her to hurt you, it says, he already is.

Crossing the river back towards the center of town, he pauses to look off at the water. With no streetlights to reflect off of it, all he can see are the tiny sparkles of stars across its surface. He thinks back to that night by the river with Vic, only but a month ago now.

You're a monster, the dark voice inside him whispers, she knows it.

He turns away from the river and marches on. Protestations rise in his mind, trying to beat back his growing disgust. Still, as his heel strikes the pavement, he can hear Claire in his mind repeating the same words his shame calls him now.

A monster.

In the distance he can make out the large oak in front of his house. Thoughts of seeing Vic outside under it, reading away in the early evening light, soften him some. Still, how could he hope to tell her the truth now?

She's terrified of the reality of her father's myths being true, he reasons. If she knew what they all were, she'd never stay.

Just outside their gate, he pauses and looks up at the house. If she knew, she'd leave, and then she'd be safe from Christophe. She'd be gone, but she'd be safe.

The idea pains him but his thoughts finally feel clear again. He pushes open the gate and quickly strides up the stairs.

Emily, still up despite the late hour, pokes her head out from the sewing room as he enters the house. "Robert! Where's Vic?"

He frowns. "I don't know. Send her up when she gets home." He keeps his tone clipped, quickly heading up the main staircase before she can ask anymore questions.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The low light from the window makes reading the diary a difficult task. Each letter is a chore, given how curly the script is, but Vic feels confident she's getting a grasp on some of the more common letters. The thrill stirs a fire in her, the possibility of finding some deep secrets tantalizing her.

As she begins to recognize the difference between the writer's looping letters, it strikes her again that some of them seem familiar. She gazes out the window for a moment, trying to place where she's seen them before. A memory of Robert's desk comes to mind but she can't be sure. Shaking it from her mind, she goes back to the task of deciphering.

Growing frustrated with how slow it is to read, she flips through the pages some. Around the halfway point Vic notices that the curly handwriting has changed into a more angular and jagged script, something that's a bit easier to read. As she flips through the pages of rushed handwriting, she catches a name that stands out.

I don't think Robert trusts me.

It's all she can make out in the dim light, but it's enough to keep her from skipping further ahead.

The writer mentions events in code, such that Vic has a difficult time understanding the full context. What she can make out paints a picture of a doubting, almost dismissive, Robert. Though he says he believes the writer in their convictions about "runts", they claim he still tries to "leave it alone".

As she begins to turn the page, a door slam startles her into closing the diary hastily. Vic glances towards the door of the room and sees no one. She waits, listening to heavy footsteps quickly fading off into the distance.

For a second longer, she hesitates and listens for any signs of someone heading her way. There is a part of her that wants to keep reading the diary and stay hidden, but another part of her has become too curious as to what Robert knows. Against her better judgment, she attempts to hide the diary by carefully wrapping it in her opera-length gloves and concealing that under her mask.

She quietly walks to the door, shoes still in hand, and quickly takes a peak into the hallway. The hallway is very dimly lit, the only light coming from the party off in the distance. Not seeing anyone obvious, she sneaks out the door, trying to close it as quietly as possible.

What she doesn't hear is the sound of the library door opening. As the latch catches, she hears someone clearing their throat and she jumps.

Lord Lyons smiles at her as she looks up in his direction. It slightly unnerves Vic in a way she can't quite explain. It's a mixture of bemusement and too keen an interest. She approaches him slowly, taking the time to try and further conceal the diary parcel behind her back in a way that she hopes appears innocent enough.

"Sneaking about?" He asks her as she approaches.

She bows to him. "I apologize, my Lord, the crowd was overwhelming and I found the first empty room to hide in."

Thankfully, he laughs at her admission. "Well, it seems we are of a similar mind. I was just enjoying the quiet of the library, if you'd like to join me there?"

"Oh, no, thank you," Vic flushes as she tries to not fiddle with the diary behind her back. "I think I had better find my escort before it gets much later."

"Who did you attend with, again?" Lord Lyons asks, the slightest of smirks tugging at the corner of his lips.

"Robert Brice. Tall, long black hair, goatee. He was in a jacket similar to my dress."

As she says this, Vic looks up at Lord Lyons as innocently as possible, her eyes meeting his. Hoping that if she feigns enough innocence he will let her get on with her evening.

It's then that the world begins to shift again. Despite the low light in the hallway, a brilliant white glow seems to emanate from behind Lord Lyons. It's bright and soft, both tranquil and dizzying in its brilliance.

"Oh, yes," Lord Lyons says in the same honeyed tone he had used the day they met in Mable's shop. "I had to ask him to leave. I do apologize for the inconvenience, I had no idea you two arrived together."

Something about his statement feels wrong to Vic, but her mind is so foggy around the edges she can't find the words to challenge it. "Why did he need to leave?"

"He had become belligerent, harassing other guests."

Again, another statement that doesn't feel quite honest but not enough to challenge. Vic, held by Lord Lyons stare, gently bites down on the inside of her lip as the world seems to lose focus. The subtle pain fighting back against the sudden daze beginning to take hold in her mind.

"That doesn't sound like him." It takes her a second to form a sentence, "I've never known him to be violent."

Lord Lyons laughs, not breaking eye contact. "He wasn't violent, my dear, but he was quite clearly drunk. A guest told me that he had gotten into a quite aggressive argument with them and several ladies. I can't have him ruining this evening for the other attendees."

Vic takes a deep breath, the fog lifting some, and tries to move past Lord Lyons. "I should really go find him then. I'm concerned something isn't right." She turns to walk off, moving the diary and her shoes from behind her back to being tightly held against her chest, no longer caring to conceal it.

Not content to let her go, Lord Lyons grabs her shoulder as she starts to move away, forcing her to have to stop and face him. When she looks back at him, her vision tunnels towards his eyes; the bright blue the only thing she sees, holding her captive.

Everything in her body suddenly relaxes, giving in to the pervading feeling of tranquility and trust. Vic recalls the first time they had met, how he had impressed upon her to trust him and see him as a friend. Any remaining resistance disappears as his eyes grow more sharp and intense in her vision.

"Victoria," he uses her full name, lulling her further, "I'm concerned about your safety around him. He may be more monster than man. Promise me you'll return to me if anything should happen?"

"Of course," she whispers her assent without hesitation.

He lets her shoulders go and Vic finds herself back in control of her body. She takes another look at Lord Lyons, finding that her vision no longer tunnels into those haunting blue eyes. The world, however, continues to hold on to its foggy nature as she begins to walk away.

At the edge of the party, she realizes her shoes are still in her hand. To her surprise, Lord Lyons follows her. In his hand is one of her shoes.

"I believe you dropped this."

She tries not to look at him as she takes it back. "Thank you, Your Lordship."

"Please, you can call me Christophe." It sounds rich and decadent to Vic's ear. "We are friends after all, Victoria."

She says nothing in response, quickly slipping her shoes back on while the fogginess in her mind gets worse. Christophe swoops in as the act of standing suddenly makes her feel faint.

"There now, let's get you on your way home."

Vic can't protest. The bright world of the party disorients her, overwhelming with the haziness swirling about her. She tries to find her breath as he escorts her to the front.

Christophe orders for her shawl to be brought out and the ghoulish attendant dutifully obeys without any comment. The smile on his face unnerves her in a way that she can't explain.

"Should I have an auto brought around to take you home?" He asks, leaning in close to her so that she can hear over the crowd.

The closeness breaks her out in goose flesh. "No, thank you."

"Isn't it quite a distance to the Brice Estate from here?"

Once again, the fogginess and softness of the light intensifies. Vic places a hand to her forehead and sighs. "Yes."

"Then please, let me bring one around for you."

Trying to block the softening world out, Vic shuts her eyes tight and definitely states, "No, thank you. I think I need the fresh air."

A deep frown briefly passes over Christophe's features, as if he is deeply disappointed in her answer.

By the time she opens her eyes again, the frown is gone and replaced with a knowing smile. He nods down at her and takes a step back as the attendant hands her shawl over.

"Well, it was a pleasure seeing you again, Victoria." There is an edge to his voice now, it only makes Vic's discomfort grow.

"Yes, until we meet again."

"Until we meet again."

Vic wastes no time in leaving. Without even looking back once, she heads directly out the door and onto the street, moving as swiftly as possible as the world returns to focus. She makes it halfway down the bridge into town before she finally slows.

A cool breeze rustles the branches of some nearby trees, sending leaves scattering down from the sky. She shivers but welcomes its cool relief. Her skin turns clammy as the fine sweat on her arms begins to evaporate.

Putting her shawl on and restarting her walk, this time at a considerably slower pace, she tries to make sense of what happened.

Everything seems clear to her up until the two drinks. They had definitely been alcoholic and she should have known better than to drink them so quickly, she

mentally chides herself. While it had been enjoyable to be free of her regular inhibitions, it was clear that too much too soon on a low tolerance had not been a wise idea.

A flush comes over her as she recalls her dance with Robert. Being so close to him, feeling his hands on her waist, and the surprising strength of his arms as he lifted her. Despite trying to focus elsewhere as they twirled, the drink and exhilaration of a new dance had made her unable to focus on anything other than his face.

Leaves crunching underfoot, she remembers the momentary look of surprise on his face right before he caught her mid-fall. Her head had been spinning at the time, unable to focus on anything other than a dull perception of pain in her temples. Even now a subtle pulsating sensation underlies every footfall.

From that moment on, her head had been too dizzy to remember much of anything. She recalls being seated outside and slowly drifting off as Robert whispered something to her. In that dreamy haze -- the flush deepening on her cheeks -- she can't tell if he really had held her close or if his delicate kiss was just a dream.

Shaking the thought from her mind, she crosses the street hurriedly and heads down the lane towards home. It had all been so lovely until she discovered the diary and encountered Lord Lyons.

That was what had bothered her the most. Even though he seemed incredibly sincere in his concern for her, Vic still found it odd that Robert had become as belligerent as Lord Lyons had said. Something was missing from the story but her hazy mind couldn't produce an answer as to what it might be.

As she approaches the house, she takes a moment to reflect on what Lord Lyons had said. That Robert was more monster than man.

The goblet, the bottles of blood -- they flash before her eyes. The tart. Yet, she recalls, since they've been home he hasn't eaten since.

Vic's eyebrows come together. The diary had also mentioned the word monster.

She looks up at the house and sees Robert's silhouette in the window. There's only one person to ask, she thinks.

Determination burning in her chest, her heart fluttering wildly, Vic pushes open the gate door.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The house is unnaturally quiet as Vic enters. She hastily and quietly hides the diary in her bag hanging near the entrance. A rustle in the next room over startles her and she quickly closes it, pulling out the gloves as she does.

Emily appears in the doorway to the sewing room, covering her mouth as she yawns. "Vic?"

Vic turns her head in Emily's direction as she removes her shoes. "Sorry, I was hoping not to wake anyone."

"No, no," Emily yawns again. "I was waiting up for you."

"You didn't have to do that, Em."

Emily dismissively waves a hand at Vic as she moves closer to inspect Vic in the dim entranceway light. Stray curls that had been pinned up earlier now hang loose, some sections having fallen out completely. A layer of dirt on her hemline darkens the burgundy velvet.

"Did you walk all the way home?" Emily finally asks.

"Yes," Vic admits, catching a view of herself in the hallway mirror. "I couldn't find Robert."

"He walked home too." There's a hint of irritation in Emily's voice, having now seen two of her creations in various states of disarray.

"Lord Lyons mentioned as much." Vic frowns as she slips off her shawl. "He said that Robert was being belligerent with other guests and was asked to leave."

"That doesn't sound like Robert."

"That's what I told him too, but he insisted that Robert wasn't the person I thought he was."

Emily shakes her head, moving in to re-pin a section of Vic's hair. "He's upstairs in his office, by the way. He asked me to send you up when you got home."

Vic sighs but says nothing as Emily finishes her re-pinning. A doubt from the depths of her stomach sends its long tentacles to her heart, beginning to wrap around any positive feelings lingering there. Though she knows it means submitting to an interrogation, she's determined to get answers this time.

As Emily goes to move away, Vic grabs at her arm, holding it tenderly. "Thank you, Em, for always being so kind to me."

The compliment takes Emily aback, a light blush spreading across the tops of her cheeks. "Of course. Are you alright?"

"I just," Vic starts, sighs, and shakes her head. "No. I feel lost in the dark and without any answers. What His Lordship said wasn't exactly comforting."

Emily takes Vic's hand and holds it in hers, gently stroking the back of it. "Honestly, Vic, I think you should talk about this with Robert," as Vic starts to protest, Emily shakes her head at her. "I know, I know, it's the last thing that you want to do. He's eccentric and aloof, yes, but I don't think he's the man His Lordship is trying to paint him as."

"He makes me so uncomfortable." Vic catches Emily's frown and further clarifies, "Lord Lyons, that is. I want to believe Robert, but he offers so little in the way of honesty."

"We all have things we're not proud of, that we want to hide. Robert has more than most. He just takes his time exposing those parts of himself to others."

Vic casts her gaze over to the staircase before looking back at Emily. "My head still feels foggy, I don't really want to go up there."

"Wait here." Emily instructs, bustling off to the kitchen.

Being in the house, with its unnatural silence, unnerves Vic. Doubt begins to smother her determination. It could all have just been a pleasant evening.

Emily returns with a glass of water, which Vic sips greedily, unaware of how thirsty she had become. Thankfully, Emily came prepared with the pitcher and refills it for her.

"I just don't know what to say." Vic admits as Emily finishes pouring. "I don't want him to hate me for wanting to know what's going on."

Emily sets the pitcher down on the credenza nearby. "Don't overthink this. Just ask him honestly, you deserve to know the truth."

"Why can't you or Johann tell me?"

"It isn't our secret to tell, Vic, I'm sorry."

Vic sighs in frustration, taking a sip of her water. Emily reaches over and grabs her free hand.

"Believe me, I understand it's frustrating. Just ask him honestly. He has trouble knowing how to open up about these things." With a final pat, Emily releases Vic's

hand and starts off back towards the sewing room. "It'll be alright, try to have a little faith."

As she climbs the stairs, Vic can't shake the ever present feeling that something in the house isn't right.

How many times has she just been told to trust Robert? That everyone has secrets to keep? Ever since she moved in there have been secrets that keep her separated from the others. Some have been revealed, but some of the larger questions have yet to be answered to her satisfaction.

As she ascends the staircase to the third floor, she thinks back to the one question she thought she had settled. Is Robert a vampyr?

Taking a deep breath, resolving herself to finally getting the answers she wants, she knocks on the door. Robert, deep in thought at his desk, startles but beckons her in. She opens the door slowly, her heart beating wildly.

Vic closes the door gently and turns to face Robert. She smooths a hand down the front of her dress, trying to keep her doubts from rising any further. Robert stares at her, torn between concern and paranoia --- fear and defensiveness keeping his mouth shut.

He diverts his gaze as Vic meets his eye. "Glad you're home safely." Restlessness in his legs forces Robert to stand and pace over to the window.

With Robert distracted looking out at the yard, Vic crosses to his desk. She sets her glass down near the edge, her eyes lingering on a set of letters open on its surface. It's uncanny how similar the rushed handwriting looks to that of the diary.

In a reflection in the glass, Robert watches her with a scowl on his face.

Feeling his eyes on her, Vic tears her curiosity away, feeling more certain than ever that something more is going on over her head.

"Where were you?" She finally asks, her voice soft but not without a noticeable snap to it.

"I told you," Robert responds curtly. "I had business to discuss with a guest. I thought you would be where I left you when I finished."

"What business?"

"None of yours."

"I came to and you were gone."

"I told you to wait."

"I was drunk, you shouldn't have left me."

Robert winces at her argument, knowing she's right. "My business isn't any concern of yours."

Vic bites down on her tongue, holding herself back from escalating things needlessly. "It does when you argue with guests and are asked to leave suddenly."

"Excuse me?" He asks, turning to face her, arms crossed in front of him.

Defiantly, Vic also crosses her arms and looks Robert straight in the eye. "Lord Lyons told me everything. After you abandoned me out on the veranda, you went and got into a belligerent argument with one of the guests."

Robert doesn't respond, instead opting to turn back to the window. He takes a deep breath at hearing the ideas Christophe has painted in her head. The whispering voice of his paranoia tells him that she's already lost.

Frustrated and feeling purposefully left in the dark, Vic lets her doubt subsume her. "Tell me again how it isn't any of my business what you're doing. Because it seems to me that *my* businesses is *your* business, but I can't have a say in what my employer gets himself into."

"Yes, I am your employer, and you live under my roof." Robert says tersely.

"And I'm an independent person, Robert! When I'm not working for you, I'm free to do what I like, but I always seem to be working for you."

Paranoia creeps its tendrils into his thoughts. He shuts his eyes, taking a deep breath, trying to ignore it.

"I live here with you! At the very least, I should have some knowledge and say about things that could impact us!" She shouts, letting her hands drop to her side.

"I certainly did have words with 'a guest', " he mocks, turning back on her, "and it is nothing that involves your living situation or your role as my assistant."

A sudden wave of disbelief comes over her. "Why won't you tell me what's going on?"

Robert says nothing and once again returns to wrestling his growing paranoia by staring out at the night sky. He runs an absentminded hand through his hair while Vic sighs in irritation, looking back down at the letters on the desk. She tries to read the letters from her vantage point, but it's too difficult to make sense of the scraggly handwriting.

Neither says anything, the silence settling in the unspoken places between them.

An idea flashes in her mind as she recalls the passage about Robert she had found in the diary. A tentacle of doubt -- wrapped tightly around her heart now -- gives a little squeeze, puppeteering her into action.

"So this is how you treat people you don't trust, you just ignore them?"

Startled, he turns to look at her. "What?"

"You ignore the feelings of people you don't trust."

"I'm not ignoring how you feel." Wounded by the thought, Robert's hand flies to his heart.

"Yes, you are!" She accuses, "I do everything you ask of me, blindly. Now I'm finally asking you what's going on and you're treating me horribly."

"Please, drop this."

"No. You're behaving like a monster."

The word snaps Robert to attention. He looks over at Vic with her arms defiantly crossed in front of her chest. Without warning, he stomps across the room towards her.

As he nears, Vic reflexively takes a step back and knocks into the desk, sending her glass to the floor. Its shattering sound drags Robert under, lost to the darkness of his paranoia now.

Vic grips the edge of the desk tightly. Robert stares down at her, almost leaning over her, not giving her the room to stand straight again. He hovers inches away from her face and she shrinks back from him as much as her position will allow.

"Drop this." His voice tense for such a simple statement.

Vic doesn't argue as he crosses back towards the window, allowing her the space to stand again. He pounds his fist against the window frame and mutters something to himself that Vic can't make out.

"Christophe was right, you are a monster." The words fall out of her mouth before she has time to consider them.

His name falling out of her mouth sends Robert out of control. "He's always right, isn't he? I'm belligerent and a monster."

Robert marches back to the edge of his desk, his eyes intensely wide with fury. Vic quickly moves towards the door but he reaches out and grabs her arm. She twists and tries to break her arm free, but Robert's firm grip seems impossible to escape.

His nails dig in to her wrist as he pulls her closer to him. "You have no idea what you're talking about."

Vic tries to pull her arm free. "Let me go!"

"No!" Robert shouts at her, tugging her into him and holding both of her arms captive. "Answer me. This is what you wanted to know, right? This is what HE told you I was, isn't it?"

"Why are you acting like this?" She protests as she continues to try and struggle away.

"Because I'm a monster."

"Stop! You're frightening me!"

"Oh, you're scared?" Robert asks mockingly.

Without warning, Robert pushes her backwards into the wall by the door. Vic shuts her eyes as her body slams into it. His grip on her arms tightens.

His breath crawls across her face as he bears down upon her.

"Look at me," he growls. When she doesn't, he grabs her chin and forcefully turns her face to him. "I said look at me."

Slowly, her bottom lip quivering, Vic looks up at him with as much defiance as she can muster.

He smiles at her but the smile never seems to reach its end. Spreading out across his face, his features deform into a grotesque grin. The sides of his mouth splitting back as it grows.

It exposes his sharp and elongated canine teeth.

Her eyes grow wide as she realizes what is going on. Vic begins to whimper as Robert leans into her neck, letting his fangs graze across her delicate skin. Frightened tears starts rolling down her face, her knees buckle, and she can feel all the fight leaving her body catatonic.

Robert hesitates there, fighting against the feral desire to rip into her neck.

Tears land on his face and the sound of her whimpers finally reach him. He breathes deeply, his features returning slowly to normal, and pulls away.

"You have no idea what monsters are." He whispers, letting go of her arms.

Vic crumples to the ground as he walks back over to the window. Tears freely roll down her cheeks as she pulls her knees into her chest, burying her face into her skirt. She rubs her hands over the velvet again and again, the motion and the texture soothing her nerves as she tries to get control of her breath.

Back at the window, Robert presses his forehead against the cool panes and shuts his eyes tightly. Her soft whimpers and heaving breaths tear into his heart, piercing it with guilt tipped talons.

"What," Vic finally whispers before clearing her throat, trying to be strong. "What sort of monster are you?"

Robert flinches at the word. "You know exactly what kind of monster I am, Vic."

It takes her a moment longer before she whispers, more to herself than to him, "Vampyr."

He shudders at hearing her say it but doesn't protest. The space between them feels like a chasm, all from a simple true word.

Paranoia seductively tells him to run. Feed all night on all the people he's denied himself over the years. Disappear into the aether with the break of dawn.

Vic slowly gets to her feet, bracing herself against the wall as her legs continue to shake. With the revelation comes some clarity and her mind begins churning out questions.

As she takes a hesitating step closer to him, Robert pounds on the windowsill again, freezing her in place.

"Just get out," he says softly.

"Please," Vic tries to take another step closer, "just tell me the truth."

"You know the truth, there isn't anything more to tell."

"Robert, I --"

He cuts her short, turning towards her and roaring, "Get out!"

Fear floods her again. Vic flings the door to the study open and runs down the stairs.

Even though he doesn't give chase, she slams her bedroom door behind her and locks it as quickly as she can. In a panic, she grabs out her trunk and begins piling clothes into it with abandon.

Her clothes pile up like the thoughts in her head until there's far too many of both. She looks down at the pile and – spying the navy skirt she had worn in Richeland – a calmness comes over her. Grabbing it up, memories of a different Robert come to her mind.

She wraps it up in her arms. How kind he had seemed then, how unfair she had been.

A fresh tear rolls down her cheek. It had all been a lie. She had been right to distrust him all along.

Doubts dragging her down into the darkness of her own thoughts, she sinks into her bed to sob into the closest pillow.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Robert winces as the door downstairs slams behind Vic. His hand flies to his chest, rubbing at a tender spot beginning to sting.

For a moment he stands watching the night sky and listening to the sound of her frenzied noise below. It offers him an anchor to the present from the depths of his paranoia. Each scrape or shuffle of her trunk across the wooden floor another link towards the surface.

To awareness of what he's done.

The soft sounds of her muffled cries creep their way through the floorboards and to his ear. Each whimper a strike to his heart.

As his hand stops its soothing, shame sparks and catches where it rests.

He buries his face in his hands, trying to shut out the world and gain some sense of control over himself. In the darkness all he finds is images of Claire's face contorted in pain and anger, her beautiful pale features distorting until all he can make out is her stark blue eyes glazed with tears and rage.

They morph into the smokey hazel of Vic's eyes, spilling over with terrified tears.

Robert slams his hand against the window frame again and again, fighting against the guilt flaring up to consume him. "Stop it, stop it, stop it," he whispers furiously to himself, his hand once again slamming the window frame. "Leave me alone!"

The memories keep coming, no matter how hard he tries to repress them. They mingle with moments spent with Vic; one moment Claire is yelling, the next Vic is crumpled against the wall in her beautiful gown. Vic at the water's edge telling him about her father transforms into Claire twirling in the moonlight.

Powerless against these thoughts, Robert falls to his knees, curling in on himself as the guilt in his chest begins to burn.

Claire's phantom fists pound on his chest as she wails, hurling insults at him as he tries to hold her and calm her down. She fights against him, calling him a monster over and over, babbling incoherently between shrieks until she goes still. Eerily still, completely unresponsive to anything.

Her still and frozen face transforms from a pale pink to ghostly white. Her mouth hangs open with her tongue hanging swollen and useless. The beautiful blue of her eyes gone, peppered over with dark spots.

The scene comes fully into focus as he whimpers protests into the floor.

Claire's useless body, clad in nothing but a simple gown, hangs lifeless from the banister of his former home. It taunts him by shifting to an image of Vic in her burgundy gown, dangling inches above the ground, his hand around her neck.

Robert curls into a ball on the ground. "I can't. I can't."

He tries to think of anything else by focusing on unrelated details, business plans, anything that gives him a moment away. Each attempt only leads him back to the solemn image of Vic, hanging in the same spot Claire had been nearly fifty years ago.

"I can't," he repeats into his hands covering his face. "I'm sorry, Claire, I can't. I can't protect you and I can't protect her. I don't know what to do."

Several moments pass in silence.

Robert grabs onto the hair at his temples, tugging lightly at their roots. The new sensation distracts his attention enough from the wildfire raging in his heart. It gives him just enough clarity to become aware of everything else for a moment.

Finally, he catches his breath. Drawing it in slowly, listening to the sound of it as he exhales.

With his ear to the floor, he can no longer hear Vic's cries from below. Taking another breath, an idea comes to his mind that he latches on to with urgency.

"She can't be here anymore," he mutters and gets to his feet.

Without hesitation, he walks to his desk and clears the diary pages off its surface, sweeping them to the floor. While they settle, he grabs a fresh sheet of paper and his pen, writing furiously.

Once done, he reads the letter over to himself, crumples it in disgust, and tosses it towards the fireplace before starting again.

It takes him several more sheets of paper to land on a draft he is satisfied with. He sighs, running a hand through his hair as he reads it again and again.

The letter is simple, dismissing her from her duties as his assistant and revoking her access to the house. No recommendation will be provided. No association may be claimed by her to future employers.

As he reads it again, the fires of shame die down.

Folding it in thirds, he holds it to his lips and whispers, "I'm so sorry, Vic. It's for the best."

Each action becomes automatic and before he knows it, the letter is sealed. Without hesitation, he softly walks downstairs and slips it under her door before heading out of the house.

AUTHORS NOTE

Thank you for reading this first book of the Far North Series! I greatly appreciate you taking a chance on a random book. I hope it provided you with some level of enjoyment.

Depending on where you encountered this book, I would greatly appreciate if you could leave a review. There are three more books planned in this series, so I hope that you'll check in for more! Additionally, if you want to keep up-to-date on future book or short fiction progress, connect, or come hang out with a chill community you can find me on:

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Thank you again! Stay safe and sane, hope to see you around!